



**The First Lady of the  
aquarium hobby...**

**Ida May Mellen**

**by Dr. Albert J. Klee**

**SECOND EDITION**

Dedicated to the memories of  
Jeanne Rondelet, Jeanne Villepreux Power, Eliza Brightwen,  
Margaret Gatty, Elizabeth Emerson Damon, Isabelle James, Anna Thynne,  
Annie Rebecca Coggeshall, Mrs. J. H. Cummings, Agnes Kuhn,  
Mrs. H. Christman, Eleanor Rulapaugh Wright and the myriad of other  
female aquarists who met or surpassed the achievements  
of the male aquarists of their times.



**AJK** Productions

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**Ida May Mellen (1877-1970), First Lady of the Aquarium Hobby.**

As an aquarium hobby historian, I frequently am asked who was the most [*remarkable, extraordinary, noteworthy, outstanding, unparalleled, etc.*] person I have encountered along the way. The adjective in the brackets may vary, but the thrust of the queries remains basically the same. In the first edition of my history of the aquarium hobby, serialized in 22 parts in THE AQUARIUM magazine from December 1967 through September 1969, I attempted to identify the five greatest American aquarists in the period ending with the advent of World War II. I decided, however, that this was tantamount to comparing apples with oranges, and abandoned the idea in the second edition, *The Toy Fish*, published in 2003.

Then there is the matter of “firsts,” i.e., the first use of electric heating, the first spawning of a particular fish, the first aquarium society, the first aquarium publication, and so on. “Firsts” are necessary staples of histories, but by themselves they do not satisfy the definition of “remarkable” in the sense intentioned here.

Next, one can examine the contributions to or the impact upon the aquarium hobby made by an individual, but then one must make a subjective decision as to which was of the greatest consequence, a decision almost always fraught with intellectual and emotional peril. An old Italian proverb reads, “Tante teste, tante opinioni” (“So many men, so many opinions”). One might think that with regard to this particular criterion that William T. Innes would have no rival, but his impact on the hobby was mainly on those already dedicated to it. Who is to say that this was of greater importance than in reaching a far greater audience and influencing a good portion of it to start in the hobby in the first place?

As I learned more about the history of the aquarium hobby in America and the people who formed a significant part of it, my personal selection in answer to this question not only was clear, the runners-up were far behind. My choice is Ida May Mellen who is, without doubt, the most multidimensional and fascinating of all the personalities I have encountered in my research. It is my earnest desire that the examination of her life and achievements that follow

will persuade the reader to give thoughtful consideration to following suit.

Ida Mellen had many difficulties during her lifetime because of the “glass ceiling,” a term referring to situations where the advancement of a qualified person within the hierarchy of an organization is stopped at a lower level because of some form of discrimination, most commonly sexism. This was especially the case during her years at the New York Aquarium, although it was a persistent source of tribulation at other times as well. On a personal level this was brought home to me because my wife, who knew Ida Mellen at the New York Public Library in the 1950s, had a similar experience during her association with a well-known zoo for whom she developed educational programs for children. This is an excellent time to express my thanks to her (Harriet, but known to her friends as Joy) for her assistance and collaboration in the research that led to this biographical sketch of Ida May Mellen.

*Albert J. Klee, October 2008*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

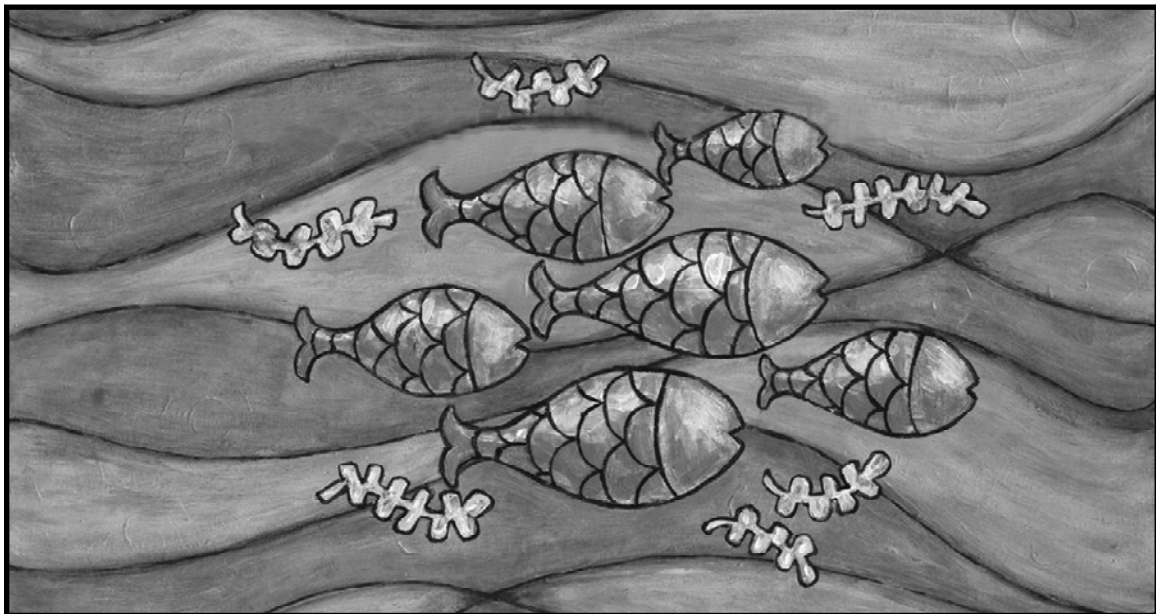
Most of the material for the First Edition was obtained from an examination of the “Ida May Mellen Papers, Manuscripts & Archives Division, New York Public Library” during a trip I made to New York City in 2008. The collection is housed in seven boxes, prior permission must be obtained and a visitation date specified in order that the material be brought up from storage. The Library permits only four boxes to be brought up per visit and I had time only to examine Boxes 1 through 4 before I had to return home. As a result, I missed some material but a later trip enabled me to examine the last three boxes and I include this material here in this Second Edition.

Fifteen pages have been added, as well as twelve additional photographs, including four of Mellen.

*Albert J. Klee, November 2013*

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# "THE FIRST LADY OF THE AQUARIUM HOBBY,"

## IDA MAY MELLEN

By Albert J. Klee, Ph.D.

### FAMILY MATTERS

Ida May Mellen was born on January 9, 1877, in an area of New York City now known as Greenwich Village, to parents Andrew Jackson Mellen and Mary Davis (Sprague) Mellen, whose familial roots respectively were in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Her mother was called "May" among family and acquaintances (in the census of 1880 her mother's name was actually recorded as "May D. Mellen"), hence the origin of Ida's middle name. She had two older brothers, Frank and Fred, 13 and 8 years respectively her senior. Her mother was a school teacher and a church singer, and through this side of the family Ida traced her lineage down to Samuel Burditt, a 2nd Lieutenant in Colonel Ephraim Wheelock's Regiment stationed at Fort Ticonderoga in 1776 as follows:

1. Andrew Jackson Mellen (1829-1880), m. 2nd, 1862, Mary Davis Sprague (1839-1906).
2. Nathaniel Jackson Sprague (1813-1851), m. 1836, Mary Harriot Burditt (1816-1873).
3. Andrew Burditt (1789-1829), m. Susan Richards (1791-1850).
4. Samuel Burditt, Jr. (1750-1809), m. 1780, Mary Wheeler (1760-1804).
5. Samuel Burditt, (Medfield, MA) Lieutenant Mass. Infantry (1735-1809).

As a consequence she was listed in the 1926 *Lineage Book* of the Daughters of the America Revolution. The family on her father's side also had a long lineage in this country, dating back to Richard Mellen who was born in England in 1620 and married Elizabeth Barret in Malden, Massachusetts in 1639. Mellen was a member and frequent contributor to the ALDEN KINDRED MAGAZINE and ALDEN KINDRED GOSSIP, publications of The Alden Kindred of America, an organization whose members can trace and document their ancestry to John and Priscilla (Mullins) Alden.

Ida's father had been married previously (to Estimate E. Annis), and from that marriage had a daughter (Laura Jennie) who died at the age of 25. Ostensibly a commission merchant, he unfortunately turned out to be one of the most infamous con men in the eastern part of the United States and among the most ruthless. In 1868, for example, he defrauded a 78-year old man in Boston named Galen Poole who was so enfeebled in mind that he was totally incapacitated from doing any kind of meaningful business. He approached Mellen, who was masquerading at the time as a State-street broker, to sell some land he owned. The latter agreed to give him \$3,000 worth of bonds of the "Brooklyn Steamship and Navigation Company" in return for the land. When Poole returned home he told his family of his good luck but one of his sons, who had



IDA MAY MELLEN, age 20.

been sent for, examined the bonds and declared them to be a fraud. The company did not exist and the bonds were not worth the paper they were written on. Mellen subsequently was arrested and tried for the swindle.

Mellen ran scams up and down the Eastern Seaboard for years, serving prison sentences in Pennsylvania and New York before his notorious career finally came to an end twelve years later. The following is a detailed report that appeared in the NEW YORK TIMES on May 8, 1879:

#### “A Notorious Swindler – The Trial and Conviction of a Man of Many Aliases

“Andrew Jackson Mellen, alias Mellen Jackson, alias George Lansing, alias Marcellus Jackson, who has justly earned the title of ‘Prince of Swindlers,’ was brought to trial by Assistant District Attorney Horace Russell, in the General Sessions Court yesterday. The prisoner, who has been in the Tombs since his arrest by Detectives O’Conner and Field, is a tall, spare, intelligent-looking man, with silvered hair and sanctimonious mien. His swindling operations are almost innumerable. He has victimized scores of credulous persons, who staked their all on his attractive advertisements and glowing promises of lucrative business. In attendance in the court-room were some 40 of his victims, who had come forward to testify against him; but the prisoner, having been placed on trial on one specific charge, their testimony could not be used. His sphere of operations was not confined to New York. He would go as far as he safely dared in this City, and then depart. His presence would next be felt in Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, and other cities, and after remaining away long enough to have been almost forgotten, would suddenly re-appear in the Metropolis, on the lookout for fresh victims. His *modus operandi* was to advertise for moneyed partners or clerks, and, after bleeding them to the last cent, disappear for some other field of operations. Mr. Russell was terribly severe in his denunciation of the operations of the prisoner, whom he characterized as “a pious fraud,” who in one breath exhorted to prayer, and in the next cheated and defrauded his neighbor.

“The prisoner was indicted for what is known as ‘constructive larceny,’ and the circumstances of the specific charge are as follows: On March 21 an advertisement appeared in a morning paper signed ‘Integrity,’ offering steady employment at lucrative wages, to any person possessed of \$150. Among those who answered the advertisement was a sea Captain named William M. Randall, of Boston, Mass. Randall, who was newly-married, had lost two vessels at sea and at the earnest request of his wife had promised to give up the sea and seek a less dangerous occupation. He was wrecked on the coast of Charleston, S. C., in January last, and, on arriving in this City, went to live at No. 7 Allen-street. He saw Mellen’s advertisement, and bit at the bait held out. He borrowed \$140 from a friend, and in consideration of a position of clerk at \$12 per week in the coal-yard of the advertiser, who turned out to be Andrew Jackson Mellen, doing business as ‘Mellen Brothers,’ at Nos. 216 and 218 Mott-street, gave the latter \$150, to be returned on the demand of



**During 1908-1910, Mellen was a student in zoology at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The Marine Biological Laboratory was unusual for its time in that it encouraged the enrollment of women students of science on an equal basis with men.**

the giver. Randall entered upon the discharge of his duties, but found that business was not flourishing. Mellen, however, held out glowing hopes of successful business in the future, and accounted for the slimness of his stock by stating that three cargoes which he had purchased had failed to arrive on time. Randall, nevertheless, grew suspicious of the nature of Mellen's business, and looked for his salary, but failed to obtain it. When closely pressed by Randall, Mellen fled from the City; but returned and was arrested, and after that fact had become known, complaints began to pour in to Mr. Russell by the score, and the number of victims increased daily. On the trial of Mellen yesterday, the facts in connection with the case were testified to by Randall, his wife, and Capt. Thomas Parsons.

"The prisoner denied that he had swindled Randall. He had acted, he said, in perfect good faith, and had invested the money in the business for their joint benefit, with the full consent of Randall. He admitted having served a turn in Moyamensing Prison, in Philadelphia, and was also, he said, an inmate of Ludlow-street Jail, in this City. A curious coincidence was that one of his victims was Mr. Phillip Dollin, interpreter of the Court of General Sessions, who, in answer to an advertisement for a partner in a lucrative wholesale grocery and provision business in Greenwich-street, became acquainted with Mellen, and was swindled out of \$1,500, advanced on stock which had never been paid for. After an absence of 20 minutes the jury



**The Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, late 1890s. The hatchery and laboratory building is at the rear left; the residence building is at the rear right.**

returned a verdict of guilty, and at the request of his lawyer the prisoner was remanded for sentence until the 16th inst., when a motion for a new trial will be made. The maximum penalty for Mellen's offense is five years in State Prison."

The motion for a new trial was denied, and on May 17, 1879 Mellen was sentenced to five years in the State Prison at Auburn. However, on August 13, 1879 he was transferred to the New York State Asylum for Insane Criminals where his condition was diagnosed as "chronic mania" or dementia from idiopathic, i.e., unknown causes. While at the asylum he suffered acute peritonitis, and died there on May 11, 1880 at the age of 50 when Ida Mellen was but three years old. Her father's history was to have a profound effect on how she perceived life in general and men in particular.

## **EDUCATION AND EARLY EMPLOYMENT**

The job of raising Ida and her brothers fell to her mother, who was 41 years old at the time. They relocated to Brooklyn where their income was supplemented by family relations. Ida, therefore, was raised in a middle-class environment so schooling and summer vacations typical of this economic status were not a problem, although Frank did take on a job at age 16 as a clerk with the American District Telegraph Company (he later became President of the Flatbush District Telegraph Company of Brooklyn). He had a long life for the time, living to the age of age of 82. However, while Ida was still in primary school, her youngest brother Fred was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Mary took Fred to Colorado for treatment, moving Ida to her aunt's household in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, he died shortly after entering the sanitarium and died there at the age of 21.

Mellen graduated in 1893 from the Lockwood Academy in Brooklyn, a highly respected private co-educational college preparatory school that concentrated on philosophy and science, especially astronomy. At first she considered following her mother's profession and to this end enrolled in the Normal Kindergarten Training school in Brockton,



Massachusetts in 1895 (which she described as “useless”), but in due course changed her mind about a teaching career. After a bout with pneumonia in 1898 she entered Browne’s Business College and Academy of English in Brooklyn. Established in 1860, it was one of the leading and most distinctive institutions of its kind. She graduated in 1900 and, at various times from 1901 to 1916, was a freelance court law reporter in the city until 1916 when, at the age of 40, she joined the New York Aquarium as its Secretary and stenographer. Mellen’s secretarial work helped pay both for the apartment she shared with her mother (Ida was listed as sole supporter of the Mellen household by the time she was 23) and also her continued interest in science.

She did, however, take advantage of three additional educational opportunities during this time. In 1902 she received a diploma from the Young Woman’s Christian Association’s Nurses Training School in Brooklyn as an Attendant Nurse (in later years she also obtained credentials as a Red Cross Nurse). These were trained attendants that came into the house and cared for convalescents, chronic cases or invalidism, and minor illnesses where the cost would be less and the service as satisfactory as that of the professional nurse. Women of social standing frequently took this course, which lasted 11 weeks and consisted of lectures and probationary work in a hospital. A few years later, in 1906, when Ida was 30 years old, her mother passed away at the age of 67. Her mother’s influence on her life cannot be underestimated as she was responsible for Ida’s love of learning and her ability to cope with adversities of the cruelest kind.

After her mother’s death, Ida turned her attention to biology. She was privately tutored by Dr. Esther F. Byrnes, a biology fellow at Bryn Mawr, and in 1908, Mellen traveled Woods Hole, Massachusetts to take Winterton C. Curtis’ invertebrate zoology course at the Marine Biological Laboratory. Founded in 1888, the Marine Biological Laboratory was unusual for its time in that it encouraged the enrollment of women students of science on an equal basis with men. In these early years, about one-third of the classes in advanced scientific studies were composed of

women who came from many areas of the country. Individual women as well as women’s social and educational groups had been instrumental in raising approximately half of the funds required for the establishment of the Laboratory. One famous alumna of the Marine Biological Laboratory was Rachael Carson, renowned for her book “The Silent Spring” and as the founder of the contemporary environmental movement.

Mellen paid her own room and board, plus the class cost, and collected organisms from the surrounding bays. In deeper water and on the new steamer Cayadetta, she observed and dissected collections in the laboratory and heard evening lectures from established up and coming members of the biological community. Mellen made lasting connections there during that summer. Winterton C. Curtis, who was in his first year as instructor at Woods Hole, recalled that he couldn’t recall much about those first frantic summers of teaching, except “my contacts with students.” Curtis did maintain contact with Mellen after she had left the Marine Biological Laboratory. In April 1909, Curtis sent Mellen a letter regarding her recent article on organisms in a local lake in the



**Rachel Carson (1907-1964), author of *Silent Spring* and founder of the contemporary environmental movement, was a student at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory in 1929, twenty years after Ida Mellen studied zoology there.**

BROOKLYN EAGLE stating that “It is a pity more of the popular accounts of such things are not as accurately and pleasingly written as this, which I consider almost a model account for such a purpose,” and asked her to return to the Marine Biological Laboratory the next year for his class. Mellen returned for the next two summers, taking the vertebrate zoology course in 1909 and the embryology course taught by Gilman Drew in 1910.

### THE WOULD-BE AVIATRIX

In 1911, when she was 34 years old, Mellen took the first steps to go about becoming an aviatrix. This was just eight years after the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, one year after the first woman in the United States, Harriet Quimby, obtained a flying license, and ten years before Amelia Earhart learned to fly! The following are extracts from letters she wrote to a friend who also was in the process of



Ida May Mellen, Age 29

inquiring how to learn to fly. The letters show her great courage, which was unusual for the time, the careful and prudent investigations she made prior to taking this rather risky plunge and the close relationship she had with her brother, Frank.

“November 6th, 1911.

My dear Roscoe:

“I imagine you may be interested in my progress toward aviation. So here is a brief account of what I have done thus far in that line, and when I say I have not yet taken my first lesson, you will see that the progress has been slow.

“When I returned to New York my first step was to have a telephone conversation with the aviation Bureau of our leading newspaper, the NEW YORK WORLD. I was invited to call upon them, which I did. They – or rather Mr. Durant who is in charge of that bureau – advised me to study with Capt. Thomas S. Baldwin of Mineola, Long Island, who, I was informed, had been in the flying business all his life, had been a balloonist, a parachute artist and a circus man, and who teaches the Curtiss biplane, also he teaches above all else, caution. They gave me the names of the other schools hereabout, but recommended him as the best instructor.

“I wrote to Capt. Baldwin and received no response. The WORLD thought he might be out of town and advised not going to Mineola unless he said he would be there. Still he was silent, and I went down anyhow. It is a long trip and not a very cheap one, and when I got into the station the station agent said he was in Chicago, and would be back the following Tuesday. So I wrote him again, – and he has never replied.

“Last Sunday week in the NEW YORK HERALD was an account of a man Welsh, who is an instructor at the aerodrome at Nassau Boulevard, Long Island. I wrote him at once, tho I understood his machine was the Wright-Burgess and I still hung out for the Curtiss, and he told me to come down anytime and he would be glad to talk aviation with me. I went down Saturday afternoon last, – and he wasn’t there.

I inquired whether there were any other instructors at the Aerodrome, and was informed that a man then out on the field with a pupil and an aeroplane, was an instructor of his own machine, a Curtiss model. He was megaphoned, and came into the aerodrome grounds from the big field. I had a long talk with him. He agreed to instruct me beginning tomorrow (Election Day) and every Saturday afternoon, Sunday and holiday all winter when the weather was not too severe, and to finish up my training in the spring. I had to sign an agreement to hold him harmless if I killed anybody (meaning if I broke my own neck, of course); and his price was \$250, payable in advance.

“I very nearly made up my mind to go on with him, but was not convinced of his thoroughness from the interview I had, and determined to make some more investigations of him before rushing into a contract. My particular ground of suspicion was that he proposed putting me directly into the machine (which he ties with ropes so it can’t get away) and teaching me first how to keep the thing down, and then how to run it on the field (cutting grass), and this without any previous study of currents, engines, machinery or construction. I thought it not quite as thorough a system as I preferred.

“To-day I visited the WORLD again, having a long talk with Mr. Durant, who is most kind and helpful. He said that the man Schneider with whom I had nearly completed arrangements is not so experienced as the man Welsh, and neither one is so good an instructor as Baldwin. He says that Welsh would require me to purchase a \$7500 machine anyway. The other two require no purchasing of machines.

“Mr. Durant invited me to a meeting of The Aeronautical Society in New York on Thursday evening of this week where all the prominent aviators within reach of New York will be assembled, and to whom he promised to introduce me. He wants me to talk with them before making my definite plans. Miss Quimby is in Texas making \$500 a day, and there is going to be a demand for women aviators this coming season (summer 1912).

“Miss Wilson is going to start a Women’s Department of The Aeronautical Society, and Mr. Durant wants me to talk with her and with Miss Quimby, and find out exactly what kind of machine will be best suited to my particular wants. Miss Quimby will be back this week or next.

“Miss Moisant is in it only for sport, and she and Miss Quimby fly monoplanes. Miss Quimby is making her \$500 a day with a Bleriot.”

“November 7th, 1911.

This has been written in a patchwork or piecemeal fashion, but you will at least see from the foregoing that matters are moving very slowly toward the goal. It is growing so late in the season that I fear I shall be able to do little or nothing until spring, much as I hope to be entirely ready with my aviator’s license, for the summer campaign. I may decide on a Bleriot for my machine. The prizes are given in smaller amounts for exhibition, and in large sums for races. The monoplanes, of course, are the things for racing.

“What progress have you made toward becoming an aeronaut?”

“One aviator tells me that no matter how big a crowd is waiting and whether they have yelled themselves hoarse for an hour, – if you don’t think the wind and weather conditions are safe, just don’t go up, and let them keep on yelling. On the other hand, Mr. Durant says that the way to make the money is to go up when you are scheduled to go up. I said, ‘Even if you know it means to come straight down wrong side up?’ He said, ‘That’s about it.’ A man Johnstone, the other day, was scheduled to fly at a certain time. He stood out on the field with his machine, but would not go up as the wind was terrific and unsafe. The crowd waited a long time and finally jeered him. That was too much (I have often noted a man can’t stand jeering, and will do anything rash rather than have that); so he went up. In less than a minute his machine turned completely over and he came down – dead.

“I feel pretty sure that I would let them yell, jeer, laugh or cry, or amuse themselves in any way they deemed fit; but if I didn’t think it safe for me to ascent, I would simply not do it.



**TOP: A 1911 Curtiss Pusher, the aircraft Mellen would have trained on had Curtiss agreed to teach her how to fly.**

**MIDDLE: Ruth Law in a Curtiss Pusher. She enjoyed one of the longest and most colorful careers of the early female aviators. She was so successful that, in 1917, she earned as much as \$9,000 a week for exhibition flights.**

**Mellen had hoped to make flying a career just as Law did. BOTTOM: A 1911 Berliot monoplane, of the type used by Harriet Quimby. More money could be made by racing so Mellen also considered this aircraft.**

“I forgot to say that Schneider would call for an agreement on my part to pay for damages up to \$50 or \$60. He has had one pupil who did not break a thing, but most of them break something. He himself broke one of his machines into about two pieces (the canvas part) getting it into the hanger. He has built several machines, and is building a passenger ship to use this coming season.

“I notice that The Aeronautical Society is strongly opposed to the fancy ‘stunts’ which have been the death of so many aviators. In its printed statement, it says ‘The Society has been instrumental in promoting legislative restriction against ‘wildcat’ undertakings which jeopardize the lives and property of the public.’

“It also says ‘The reckless sacrifice of useful lives caused by the present dangerous condition of the aeroplane has inspired many members to construct along original lines. The Society enjoys the largest active membership of aeronautical enthusiasts in the U.S. and is now about to embark upon the development of the Hydro-Aeroplane. With this in view an effort is being made to lease a suitable water front close to the city where the work can be properly carried on.’

“If all goes well with my plans, I shall join the woman’s branch of this Society when organized.

“I expect in another week to know definitely what machine I shall learn, and with whom I shall study, and all about it. When I have actually made my selection and arrangements, I will write you again. If I get ahead of you, perhaps I can help you along, – although you many get there first after all.

“In regard to the fancy stunts I spoke of, I heard an amusing incident from a man at the Aerodrome. He said that an aviator was turning all sorts of curves and figures in the air, and a big crowd on the grandstand couldn’t understand what he was trying to do. They kept saying, ‘He doesn’t know how to fly in a straight line!’ ‘He can’t fly yet!’ There he was risking his neck every instant, trying to cut some clever curves, and they didn’t appreciate it in the least.

“Well, I’ve given you all the aviation news I have in my head at this time, but you can see that I am pretty well steeped in it just now. My brother is bitterly opposed to my ambition to fly. He sent me a newsletter clipping stating that although Rodgers would attempt to reach the coast, he could not win the Hearst \$50,000, which expired according to its terms, on October 10<sup>th</sup>. My brother attached to this clipping a note, reading, ‘Hearst never offers any prizes that can

be won.' I wrote on the postal card, and sent it to my brother, 'If I had been in the business, you would not have been able to say that the prize was beyond winning.'

"We all feel that Hearst ought to make a present of some kind to Rodgers who reached California day before yesterday, the first person to cross America in an aeroplane. We feel he ought to have a substantial purse, as well as all the fame."

By way of explanation, publisher William Randolph Hearst offered \$50,000 for the first coast-to-coast flight. Cal (Calbraith Perry) Rodgers, his pockets still lined with money he had won in August 12, 1911 in the Great Chicago Air Meet (\$11,285, a princely sum for the day), made the trip, sponsored by a popular grape drink of the time, in a grinding course that included 69 stops and 19 crashes. By December 10, 1911, and enduring phenomenal hardship, the 84-day flight was 19 days too long to qualify for the money and the Wright Baby Racer he was using was practically another airplane having had so many parts replaced. Frank Mellen was right; Hearst never paid Rodgers a single cent. On April 3, 1912, while making a test flight in Long Beach, California, he flew into a flock of birds, causing the plane to crash into the ocean. His neck was broken and his body badly mashed by the engine of his machine. He died a few moments later. He was the 127th airplane fatality since aviation began, and was the 22nd American aviator to be killed.

A few days after this letter was written, Mellen wrote directly to Glenn H. Curtiss, who would one day be considered "Father of Naval Aviation" and "Founder of the American Aircraft Industry":

"Mr. Glenn H. Curtiss  
Care of Curtiss Aeroplane Co.  
1737 Broadway, New York City  
November 12th, 1911

"My dear Sir:

I am very much in need of some good, sound advice in a matter of aeronautics, and as I have no reason for distrusting the saying 'There's nothing like going to

headquarters,' I am making bold to write you about it.

"For several months I have had the aeronautical bee in my bonnet, but it has seemed impossible to find out any real facts which would enable me to definitely determine whether it is a field which I ought to enter. Frankly, my idea is to make money. I do not wish to fly for sport.

"I want to stake a small fortune, say twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars, so that I may feel that I can afford to devote my life to science and philosophy, in which I am thoroughly trained, but which afford so poor a recompense that I am obliged to abandon them and make my living in a law office.

"I may say that I very early concluded that the Curtiss was the machine I wished to learn, and I have been trying without success to get into communication with Capt. Baldwin of Mineola, who, I am informed, teaches your biplane and is the best instructor hereabout; but he pays no attention whatever to correspondence, nor have I been able to find him on a special trip I took to Mineola for the purpose. I went to Nassau Boulevard, to the aerodrome, but the only instructors I learned of there were one Welsh who was absent at the time and who I believe teaches the Wright (or Wright-Burgess), and one Schneider, who manufactures his machines 'after the Curtiss model,' and was quite willing to undertake my instruction at any time, but on whose skill I was not altogether prepared to rely.

"If it is not too great an imposition, may I ask you to advise me in the matter, that is, as to whether you believe there will be any demand for women aviators, and if so whether you believe that I should be able to make a deal of money, and if so, where you think I should learn to fly?

"For any courtesy which you may extend, I shall be duly appreciative, and such advice as you care to give me will be gratefully received.

"Yours very truly,

Ida M. Mellen"

Mellen received the following reply"

“November 13th, 1911

Dear Madam:

“Your letter addressed to Mr. Curtiss has been turned over to the writer with instructions to make proper reply.

“I regret to advise that it is the policy of this Company, not to take women as pupils at the Curtiss training schools at Hammondsport, N. Y., and San Diego, Cal. We have no training schools at Nassau Boulevard or Mineola, and Captain Baldwin does not operate or teach any one to operate the standard Curtiss aeroplane. His machines are of the Curtiss type.

“I note what you say with respect to your object, should you be successful in becoming an aviatrix, and for that reason would be inclined to make an exception in your case were it possible to do so.



**FRANK MELLEN, age 33.**

**Ida Mellen was close to her brother, and he tried hard to persuade her to give up the idea of being an aviatrix.**

However, Mr. Curtiss having made an absolute rule on this point, does not feel that he would be justified in making an exception at this time.

“Yours very truly,  
Jerome S. Fanciulli  
General Manager”

After being turned down by Curtiss, Ida ultimately abandoned the idea of becoming an aviatrix. This was fortunate for the aquarium hobby since Quimby was killed the year after in a plane crash. On July 1, 1912, flying in the Third Annual Boston Aviation Meet at Squantum, Massachusetts, with William Willard, the event’s organizer aboard, her brand-new 70-horsepower, two-seat Bleriot monoplane unexpectedly pitched forward, ejecting both Willard and Quimby. The two plunged to their deaths in the shallow waters of Dorchester Bay in front of some 5,000 horrified spectators. The plane, on the other hand, glided down and lodged itself in the mud.

Ida Mellen, by the way, always was an adventuresome sort. A twenty-six year friendship started in 1924 with Viola Irene Cooper (1894-1955), a woman writer who, in 1926 along with another young woman, made a three-month voyage serving as midshipmen aboard the ancient Barque, the *Bougainville*, built in 1863. In this voyage they sailed from the West Coast to Christmas Island, the Fiji Islands and New Caledonia. Mellen wished ardently to have been able to accompany Cooper, but at the time she was 50 years old, the crew had met their quota, and she had a responsible position at the New York Aquarium.

## **EUGENICS**

In 1912 Mellen was a summer student and volunteer collaborator at the Eugenics Research Association in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y. Because of the unsavory reputation that surrounded eugenics in later years, it is necessary to explore here her involvement and interest in some detail.

The eugenics movement – the word “eugenics” is taken from the Greek to signify “good birth” or “well-born” – that ran from the turn of the Nineteenth

Century to the start of World War II was regarded by its advocates as a social responsibility, meant to create healthier and more intelligent people, to save resources, and to lessen human suffering. Eugenics became an academic discipline at many colleges and universities, with funding being provided by such prestigious sources as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Carnegie Institution of Washington and the Harriman family.

Many very prominent thinkers and scientists of the time were associated with eugenics. Alexander Graham Bell, for example, in his lecture presented to the National Academy of Sciences in 1883, "Memoir upon the formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race," noted that congenitally deaf parents were more likely to produce deaf children and tentatively suggested that couples where both parties were deaf should not marry (ironically, his wife Mabel was deaf, although none of his children were). Another advocate of eugenics was David Starr Jordan who, along with Carl Eigenmann, is considered to be one of the founders of American ichthyology.

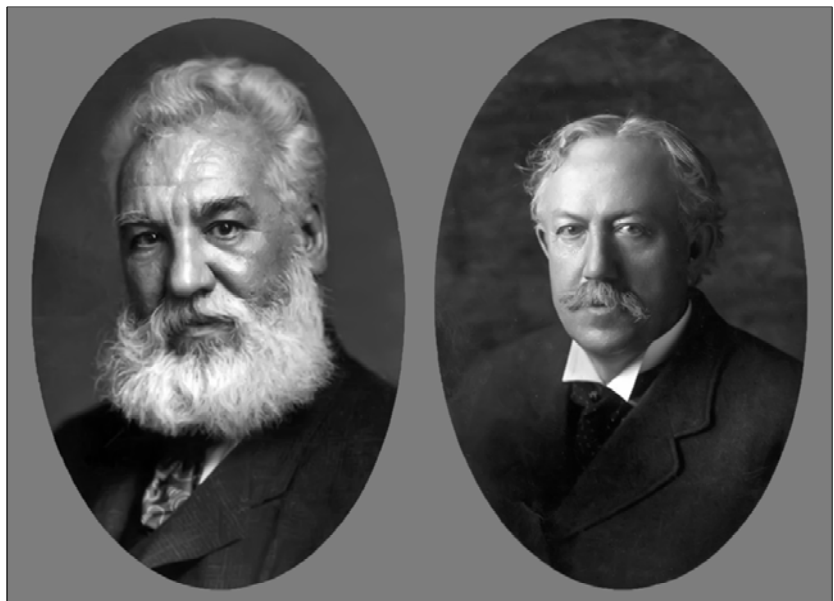
There were two approaches to eugenics. Mainstream eugenicists placed emphasis on a benign application of science to humanitarianism that aimed at increasing the percentage of healthy and talented individuals in succeeding generations. The other approach advocated negative measures such as legalized forced sterilization, marriage restrictions and special support for the procreation of "worthy" couples. As an example of the last, the following is taken from an article entitled, "Wanted: Better Babies: How Shall We Get Them?" written in 1931 by Ellsworth Huntington, a well-known eugenicist of the times:

"Suppose it were possible to grant from the state funds a sum of \$100 for each Ph.D. who is the parent of a child. Thus the child of a man and woman who each held such a degree

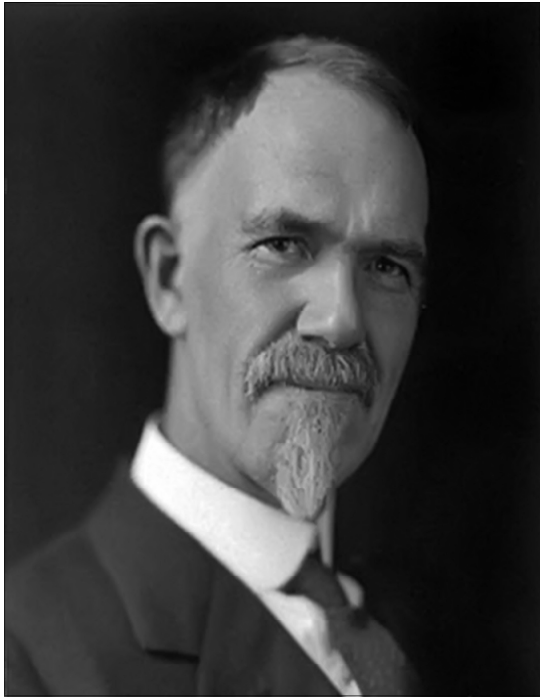
would entitle them to the sum of \$200 and then upon some careful scale a college graduate would receive perhaps \$90, a high school graduate \$75, a grammar school graduate \$50 and a moron nothing."

Jordan, however, did not support the more radical implications of eugenics. "The artificial breeding of the superman" he said in "The Heredity of Richard Roe, a Discussion of the Principles of Eugenics" (American Unitarian Association, Boston, 1911) "would defeat its own ends." He explained: "It would breed out of existence the two most important factors the race has won... love and initiative. The superman produced by official eugenics would not take his fate into his own hands, and his descendants would not know the meaning of love."

To truly appreciate the social conscience of those who supported eugenics at its start, however, it is revealing to note that those who desired to preserve the genetic quality of the human population were also anxious to preserve all that was wonderful in the world of nature. Indeed, it was mainly those who were interested in this aspect of people who



**LEFT: Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922).  
RIGHT: David Starr Jordan (1851-1931). Jordan (along with Carl Eigenmann, is considered to be one of the founders of American ichthyology) and Bell, inventor of the telephone, were early advocates of eugenics.**



**Charles Benedict Davenport (1866 - 1944). He was one of the leaders of the American eugenics movement. A prominent American biologist, he headed the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor. His passion for eugenics blinded him to the fact that it muddled science with social philosophy.**

pioneered the conservationist movement which similarly sought to conserve the rich variety of plant and animal species that nature had bequeathed to the care of man. Alexander Graham Bell, for example, was the second president of The National Geographic Society and founded THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE.

Although Mendel's laws were first rigorously tested in pea plants and fruit flies, evidence quickly mounted that they applied to all living things. Early in the 20th century, the first examples of recessive, dominant and sex-linked inheritance were found in humans. Recessive inheritance was first revealed in alkaptonuria (1902), an enzyme deficiency that leads to cartilage degeneration, and albinism (1903). Dominant inheritance was discovered in brachydactyly (short fingers, 1905), congenital cataracts (1906) and Huntington's chorea (1913).

And sex-linked inheritance was discovered in Duchenne muscular dystrophy (1913), red-green color blindness (1914) and hemophilia (1916). Eugenists made early contributions to our understanding of some of these disorders by constructing pedigrees of affected families.

However, these disorders have easily definable symptoms and are caused by single genes. Eugenists were wrong to use simple Mendelian schemes to explain complex disorders and traits whose symptoms are difficult to define and which are now known to involve multiple genes or are influenced by the environment. Today, we know of more than 5,000 single gene disorders in humans. Modern medicine views each disorder as discretely inherited; the inheritance of one disorder is unrelated to the inheritance of another. Eugenists, however, thought that "degenerate" traits were inherited together and viewed disabilities as related symptoms of "bad stock." They also believed that immorality or poor living habits were inherited.

Unfortunately, eugenists were generally less concerned about the people affected by genetic disorders than about the threat such people posed to the purity of the national "germplasm." They were, for example, especially concerned about hereditary blindness because the institutionalized blind were considered a burden to society. The ophthalmologist Lucien Howe conducted a study on hereditary blindness for the American Medical Association and lobbied for legislation to restrict the marriage of blind persons. Eugenists considered epilepsy an inherited disorder, and many states sterilized epileptics to prevent its spread. This was another of the eugenists' misinformed stands – epilepsy's causes are still not fully understood.

Mellen's training at the Eugenics Research Association differed from her summers at Wood's Hole. In a large class of women, Mellen learned medical and psychological principles that Charles Davenport (the founder of the ERO and one of its primary lecturers) deemed instrumental in eugenic understanding. Beginning at 8:15 am, and continuing up to eight hours a day, Davenport and the assistant



director Harry H. Laughlin inundated their students with information ranging from dissections to statistics in order to prepare them for the work of tracking down genealogical information in the field. Mellen paid \$30 for her training course, and an additional \$5 fee for her weekly room and board. Her overall costs were between \$75 and \$95 for the entire course.

After her summer at the ERO, Ida Mellen did not join the 57% of trained field workers who took positions in eugenics, possibly because there was no increase in pay and she would have had to work outside of the city, but she did maintain connections with her fellow trainees and her instructors. Long after Mellen returned to her secretarial work in New York City, she maintained her connections by writing letters to the EUGENICAL NEWS, a newsletter printed by the ERO. She also continued working in the capacity of “volunteer collaborator,” a phrase applied to unpaid persons who gathered information for a planned eugenics database. Additionally, she remained in contact with Davenport and Laughlin. Her correspondence with the latter revolved primarily around eugenics, but correspondence with Davenport, although including eugenical interests, also contain information about her career and Davenport’s interest in her work. Davenport consistently inquires about Mellen’s job status. In April of 1914, she states, “Permit me to thank you for referring Mr. Hamilton to me in his quest for a stenographer.” Her relationship with Davenport seems to have been one of mutual interest and respect, and it is this final part of her biological training that may have opened the door to the scientific career about which she dreamed.

### THE EUGENICS RECORD OFFICE

In the summer of 1912 Mellen was a volunteer collaborator at the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y. being listed as Librarian and File Clerk. The Eugenics Record Office was established in 1910 with Davenport as director and Laughlin as key eugenicist and leader of the eugenical sterilization movement as its superintendent. It was a center for the study of

human heredity and a repository for genetic data on human traits.

Between 1910 and 1924 the ERO trained 258 students (85% of them women) to collect information about individuals, families and communities. Hundreds of “volunteer collaborators” obtained family study kits from the ERO that included “Brief Instructions on How to Make a Eugenical Study of a Family,” along with “family pedigree charts” and “individual [genetic trait] analysis” cards. Though some historians have dismissed eugenic field-workers as careless or uncritical, many had scientific or medical backgrounds and took the research seriously. These field-workers raised critical questions about methodology and ethics. The ERO system, for example, boxed in researchers by using labels representing extremes, such as “wittiness” versus “dullness,” without giving field-workers any in-



**TOP: The first home of the Eugenics Record Office where Ida Mellen worked as a volunteer in 1912. BOTTOM: The library at the Eugenics Record Office .**



**TOP: The New York Aquarium as it looked when Mellen joined the staff in 1916.**  
**BOTTOM: As it looked when she left in 1929.**

between option to describe subjects. Nevertheless, the Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory was a very prestigious laboratory where a lot of important research on genetics was done.

In the post-World War I years, aggressively anti-foreign and racist views increasingly dominated ERO proceedings. Its conferences featured fewer research presentations and more discussions of political and legal eugenic actions, such as the 1919 meeting's consideration of a "model sterilization statute." All this occurred, however, after Mellen's short summer stint there.

### **THE NEW YORK AQUARIUM YEARS**

Mellen was hired on October 9, 1916 as the Secretary of the New York Aquarium. It is possible that Davenport recommended Mellen for this position since he sat on the Aquarium Committee from 1916 to 1918 and had helped Mellen in the past secure stenography positions, especially those relating to scientific matters. The November 1916 issue of the *ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN*

announced: "Miss Ida M. Mellen, who has been appointed secretary and stenographer at the Aquarium, holds not only a certificate as an expert amanuensis, but comes to the Aquarium with an excellent training in biological work. She has had the advantage of academic and normal school training, followed by special biological studies at the Marine Biological laboratories at Woods Hole, and at Cold Spring Harbor."

Immediately after her arrival the Director, Charles Haskins Townsend, reported that Mellen was busily reorganizing the library, labeling books and photographs. In the coming years, Mellen's job of cataloguing extended to a database of the exhibits at the Aquarium, a catalogue of every book in the library, and an extensive chart detailing every public aquarium in the world. But Ida's duties were not restricted to library and secretarial duties for long. She quickly became more than just the Secretary of the Aquarium, and it wasn't long before she was promoted to Aquarist, working directly for Louis Mowbray, an Assistant to the Director.

World War I began in 1914 and the United States entered the war in 1917. Great numbers of young men at once enlisted in various branches of the service. Profiting, however, by the experience of Great Britain, the government determined on conscription as a more democratic method of raising an army. A draft law was passed providing for the enrollment of all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one. These were examined and classified, and from time to time large groups were sent to camps to be trained. Each of these camps could take care of approximately fifty thousand soldiers. Under a later draft law passed in 1918, the age limits for enrolling men were extended to include those from eighteen to forty-five.

This caused a labor shortage among men and women were obliged to fill their absences. Many taboos and restrictions thrown up previously to keep women out of industry were broken down. Women worked as streetcar conductors, radio operators, in steel mills and logging camps during the war. As a consequence, women roles began to change rapidly

because of the War. This affected Ida Mellen as well, as probably was the defining factor responsible for her metamorphosis from Secretary to Aquarist at the Aquarium after 1917.

During her time at the Aquarium Mellen wrote a number of monographs and articles, mostly on fish and aquariums, but also on occasion on other animals, language and genetics including:

- 1917:** "Care of Salamanders and Frogs in Captivity," N.Y. Zoological Society, New York Aquarium; INFORMATION CIRCULAR No. 4.
- 1918:** "Salt Water Aquaria at Home, AQUATIC LIFE, Vol. III, No. 5, January 1918.
- 1918:** "The Common Snails –Their Relation to Balanced Aquaria," SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN SUPPLEMENT, Sept. 21, 1918.
- 1919:** "The Fresh-water Shrimp," N. Y. ZOOLOGICAL SOC. BULLETIN, 1919.
- 1919:** "Prehensile-Tailed Pipefishes," N. Y. ZOOLOGICAL SOC. BULLETIN, November, 1919.
- 1919:** "Three Generations of Deaf White Cats," JOURNAL OF HEREDITY, November, 1919.
- 1922:** "The Effects of Captivity on A Sex Character," SCIENCE MAGAZINE, November 17.
- 1923:** "Whitefishes Reared in the New York Aquarium," ZOOLOGICA, 2(17).
- 1924:** "Tyrian Purple from Sea Shells," BULLETIN NEW YORK ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 23, March 1924.
- 1925:** "A Table of Information Regarding the Large Aquariums of the World," in *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report, New York Zoological Society, N.Y.Z.S.*
- 1926:** "New Medicines for Sick Fishes," ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN, 29.
- 1926:** "A Contrast to Kaspar Hauser," THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 37, No. 2, April.
- 1926:** "The Goldfish Puzzle," AMERICAN SPEECH, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 62-64, October.
- 1927:** "Naming the Bungalow," AMERICAN SPEECH, Vol. 2, No. 6, pp. 269, March.

- 1927:** "The Natural and Artificial Foods of Fishes," AMERICAN FISHERIES SOCIETY TRANSACTIONS, Vol. 57, Issue 1.
- 1927:** "Plea for the Turtles," NATURE MAGAZINE, Vol. 9, February.
- 1927:** *The Young Folk's Book of Fishes.*
- 1928:** "The Treatment of Fish Diseases," ZOOPATHOLOGICA, Vol. 11, no. 1, April.
- 1928:** "Aquarium English," AMERICAN SPEECH, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 460-463, August.
- 1930:** "Can A Catfish Count?" SCIENCE MAGAZINE, June 6 (published in 1930 but written while she was still at the Aquarium).

Her 1928 article on "Aquarium English" is little known to aquarists and so is reprinted here in its entirety:

#### Aquarium English

With the coming of the public aquarium, there was difficulty in deciding upon the correct title for a person expert in the care of fishes and other aquatic animals in captivity. Manifestly the word would have to begin with aqua. Agassiz, who was deeply interested in the Aquarial Hall in Boston, was well qualified to suggest a title, but there is no evidence that he ever did so. Mr.



This excerpt from a 1928 MANSFIELD NEWS article featured Ida Mellen as the "Fish Doctor."

William E. Damon, who was also interested in the Boston aquarium and was among the first to conceive the idea of a public aquarium for New York, uses the word aquarianist in his book, *Ocean Wonders*, 1896. The expression Aquarial Hall, used to designate the first aquarium in the United States, seemed not to survive long enough to get into the dictionaries.

In England the word aquarian has been used as in the title, *The Aquarian Naturalist*, a book by Thomas Rymer Jones, published in 1858. This word, however, already belonged to a religious sect, about which a book is now being advertised in this country, namely, *The Aquarian Age*. In the third century its members were called Aquarii.

Many years ago at the New York Aquarium the word aquarist was selected as being less awkward than aquariist, which was regarded as technically the better word. My usual annual announcement from our executive committee's secretary, reads "I have the honor to announce that at the meeting of the Board of Managers



Charles Haskins Townsend (1859-1944),  
Director of the New York Aquarium from  
1902 to 1937.

on December 26, 1927, you were elected Aquarist at the Aquarium for the year 1928." The word, strange to say, is ignored by dictionary makers, but it is now commonly used throughout the United States, not only in public aquariums and by private individuals engaged in the rearing of tropical toy fishes – they also call themselves fish fans – but by the proprietors of pet shops and goldfish farms. It reached England long ago and superseded the word aquarian. A magazine published in London is called *The Amateur Aquarist and Reptilian Review*. The new *Standard Dictionary*, curiously enough, gives the word aquariist, which never has been used.

The fish fans have many terms among themselves, which are known to all amateur and professional aquarists. Mouth breeders means fishes that incubate their eggs in their mouths; live bearers means viviparous species; tropicals means fishes from warm streams, whether in Florida, South America, Asia or the Indies; natives means United States species that do not require heated water; pigmies means the same as toy fishes – minute species for home aquaria. Several types of fishes are known as air breathers. Dipnoids or lung fishes may be included in this classification, also the walking fish that respire through its tail while the remainder of the body rests out of water, and the fishes whose gills are provided with a supplementary breathing apparatus for storing air. The last are, however, more often called labyrinth fishes. Calicoes refers to two kinds of goldfishes, the calico telescope and the calico shubunkin.

In public aquariums in the eastern and middle western states, a tropical collection refers to salt water fishes brought from Florida, Bermuda or Turk Islands. In San Francisco, this term would apply to fishes from Hawaii. To differentiate these and toy tropicals, one would say salt water tropicals for the large fishes and fresh-water tropicals for the pigmies. (By some inexplicable anomaly, when the words fresh-water and salt water are used as compound adjectives, only the former is hyphenated.)

Generally speaking, the common names of fishes are preferred, but in some species the scientific name or part of it finds favor. Guppy, for example, is a term commonly applied to the rainbow fish, the word being part of its former specific name, guppyi. Similarly scalare is the only term now applied to the Brazilian half-moon or fresh-water angel fish, this being its specific name. As it is the queen of all aquarium fishes of small size, and formerly sold for more than its weight in gold, the name is well known to the many thousands of fish fans throughout the world. The black-banded sunfish, most popular of natives, is generally referred to as the chaetodon, its specific name.

Some breeders (people who breed fishes for sale or for private enjoyment), called also fish fanciers, cross species of toy fishes, producing new strains. The man who has experimented most with this form of hybridizing, miscalls it hybreeding. "If we don't hybreed," he says, "how are we going to get new varieties?" It begins to look as if hybreeding will take its place along with daphne – a corruption of daphnia, the name of a minute fresh-water crustacean used as live food for fishes; and enchytrae – mispronounced with a soft c – being a corruption of Enchytraeans or Enchytraeidae, also called white worms, used for live food for small fish mouths.

Dry foods or prepared foods mean ground puppy biscuit, Chinese ground shrimp, dead flies or water fleas, ant eggs, or other desiccated foods put up in small boxes and sold in pet shops. Moist foods means boiled cereals and vegetables, raw meat, fish or shellfish, sour milk, junket, cream cheese, and other fish foods that are fed to toy fishes on a feeding stick or food stick – a twig or other small, pointed stick. In public aquariums, the terms dead food and cut food apply to fresh meat, fish and shellfish that are prepared by the chef in the feed room on feeding day for the finny boarders and other animals. The food is turned over to tank men, fish culturists (those who understand the rearing of commercial fishes from eggs) and other employees charged with the feeding of the exhibits.



Henry Fairfield Osborn (1857-1935), President of the New York Zoological Society.

Osborn, along with Madison Grant, wanted the Aquarium to become a center for science but this was resisted by Townsend.

One of our men introduced the term goofy for an animal that is off its feed.

To give the fishes a bath does not mean that we are keeping them dry, but that they are to be treated for sickness in some chemical solution – salt water, permanganate of potassium, etc. They are particularly subject to fungus, a species of parasitic plant often called also by its generic name, Saprolegnia.

Every fish fan maintains in his home from one to thirty or more balanced aquaria, i.e., aquaria in which the water remains unchanged because a perfect balance has been established between the plant and animal life. There are sufficient fishes to provide carbon dioxide for the plants and enough plants to insure a plentiful supply of oxygen for the fishes. In using the plural of aquarium, it will be noticed that we say public aquariums, but balanced aquaria.

To aerate the water means to use an air pump, or to inject compressed air into a tank, or to employ a special device known as an aerator, controlled by electricity. The word seldom is pronounced correctly, being almost invariably heard as "airiator." Heaters are devices for raising the temperature of the water for tropical species, while refrigeration means the employment of ice or of an ammonia plant for chilling the water for northern species.

Hatchery, hatching trays, batteries, or hatching jars; and hatching troughs all refer to a fish culturist's apparatus for artificially incubating the eggs of food and game fishes.

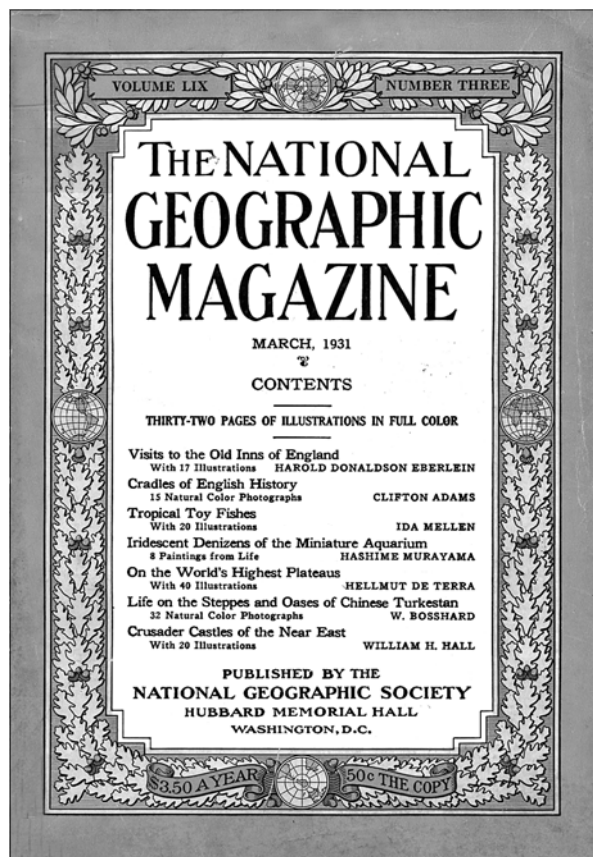
Taddies is an affectionate term for pollywogs or tadpoles, and a few tropical toy fishes whose generic name is *Mollienisia* are known as the Mollies. Charlie never refers to anything but a

penguin, these birds always going by that name because of their Chaplin-like walk. Mr. Fish means a phone call for an anonymous boarder. We discontinue service entirely on April Fool's Day because of the too great popularity of Mr. Fish, Miss Finn, Mr. C. Lyon, Messrs. Seal, Salmon, Trout, and Pike, and others. These calls never go beyond the switchboard except when someone asks for Miss Mullet, a name sometimes mistaken by the operator for mine. Miss Mullet and the rest are always taking a swim when wanted on the phone. There are other aquarium terms such as tanks, wall tanks, floor tanks, pools, etc. Service galleries are passages behind the scenes where the wall tanks are cared for. Lines are pipes conveying steam, and salt, fresh or brackish water.

And finally sleepers does not refer to fishes of that name – the Dormitators, that rest for hours at a time in one position – for this species seldom is exhibited. It has reference to the Weary Willies who amble regularly into the building to nap on the benches and get warm in winter, spending their summers in the Park. We deeply disappointed these somnolent habitués last season by deciding to do away with the benches during the winter time. This term, therefore, it is hoped, may become obsolete in the New York Aquarium.

Mellen even found the time in 1925 to study psychoanalysis under the renowned physician, Dr. Gregory Stragnell, then editor of the *NEW YORK MEDICAL JOURNAL*. Why Mellen was interested in studying under Stragnell is perhaps suggested by the following abstract of one of Stragnell's papers, "Psychopathological Disturbances from the Avoidance of Parental Responsibility," published in 1922:

"In psycho-analytic work up to the present, considerably more attention has been paid to the filio-parental relationship from the point of view of the children than from that of the parents. Such an article as this is therefore welcome, although it admittedly deals only with one factor in the complex conditions that determine the attitude of parents towards their



**Mellen's ground-breaking article on "Tropical Toy Fishes" appeared in this March 1931 issue of THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE**

children. The author takes his text from four recent plays – Sir James Barrie’s *Mary Rose*, Clemence Dane’s *Bill of Divorcement*, Eugene O’Neill’s *Anna Christie* and Franz Molnar’s *Liliom*. In all of these plays a parent shirks the responsibilities of his or her parenthood by disappearing in one way or another during the whole period of the child’s growth.”

In 1927 she presented the paper, “Limulus,” read at the New York Academy of Medicine and in the same year published two books: “Fishes in the Home” (New York Zoological Society) and “The Young Folks’ Book of Fishes” (Dodd, Mead & Co.). The following year she wrote a horticultural book, “Roof Gardening” (A. T. De La Mare Company), and followed that up by touring Europe to study the operations of public aquariums. During all this time Mellen gave many lectures and lantern slide programs on the New York Aquarium, its operation and its fishes.

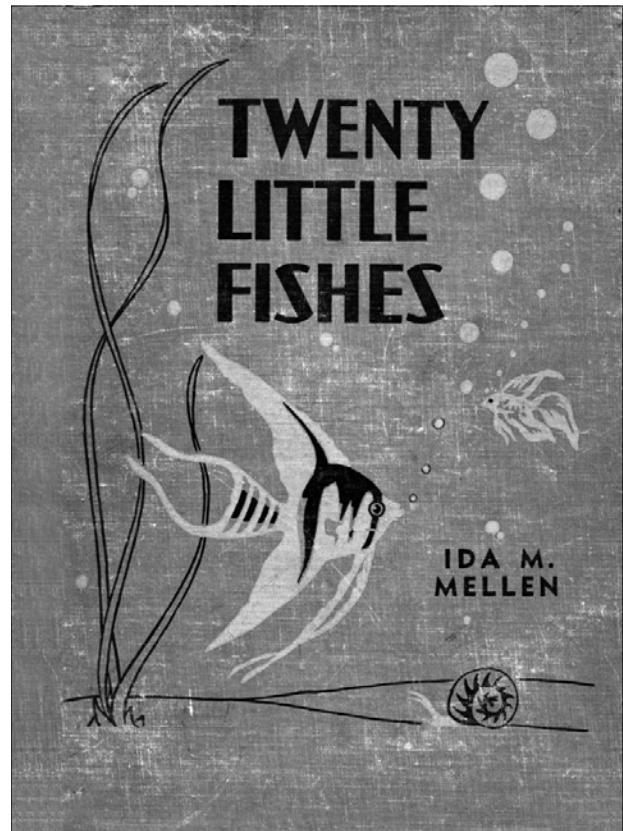
Ida Mellen was also a pioneer in aquatic-animal therapy and received national fame as the “Fish Doctor.” The following was published in the MANSFIELD NEWS for June 25, 1928:

#### **“Doctor” Remedies Fish Ills**

Only one woman in the world practices the profession of physician and surgeon to fishes, and her original researches in ichthyology (the branch of zoology that treats of fishes) are clearing up some ancient mysteries.

“Doctor” Ida Mellen of the New York Aquarium, the largest in America, has a national practice, for she receives requests for treatment of ailing fish all over the country. Long distance calls from Pennsylvania, or Connecticut, or Rhode Island, from the anxious owner of a turtle or goldfish are no novelty to Miss Mellen.

She has found that fish are heir to much the same ills as are humans. They suffer from tuberculosis, cancer, cold (from getting wet, mayhap), dropsy, eye trouble, indigestion, skin troubles that yeast would relieve, wounds, and a number of bacterial ailments. And they have nervous prostration, too.



*Twenty Little Fishes*, published in 1942, was a simple children’s book, profusely illustrated with colored drawings.

One of Miss Mellen’s most interesting patients was a rare barbel, brought in by its puzzled owner. He chased madly around the tank, as if being pursued. It developed that the barbel had been kept in a tank with other fish, and that he had given signs of being displeased with his neighbors. Plainly he had worked himself up into a fret; there were no symptoms of organic troubles. Miss Mellen prescribed rest and quiet. The barbel was kept in seclusion, and in two days was normal. Separated permanently from objectionable company, he thrived.

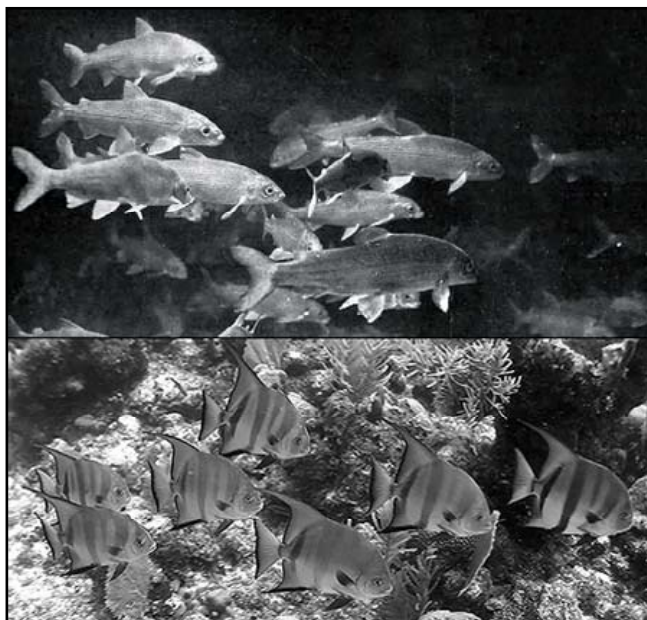
Miss Mellen is particularly proud of having saved the life of a specimen, a lung-breathing fish, which had been transported in health across the Atlantic twice – from Brazil to London, and thence to New York – only to catch bronchitis in Battery Park.

She frequently has to operate on a patient to remove a tumor or relieve an obstruction. For colds in the head and nose, bronchitis and such, she gives castor oil. She puts the oil in a small tank and forces them to bathe in it. They hate it like children. For indigestion she administers Epsom salts. Tumors that do not require an operation she treats with hot water and iodine. Thirty-eight distinct diseases of fish have been discovered, and 35 efficacious treatments found. Miss Mellen is the compiler of the first published contribution to Zoopathologica on treatment of fish diseases.

Another article discussing Mellen's achievements in this area appeared in 1927 in an issue of the BROOKLYN NY DAILY EAGLE:

**Miss Ida M. Mellen Makes Pioneering Studies in Curing Ills of Sea Denizens**

Doctoring fishes doesn't sound like a very exciting task. Or at least that is the way the



**TOP:** Whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*). In 1923, Mellen saved an egg-bound specimen in the Aquarium by stripping ("A Whitefish Saved by Stripping, ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN, Volume XXVI, No. 4, July 1923. **BOTTOM:** Mellen saved the eyesight of a tank of Spade Fishes *Chaetodipterus faber*) by dipping them Silvol, a silver protein.

average person looks at it. But then the average person has never talked to Miss Ida M. Mellen. Miss Mellen's official position was at first that of expert on invertebrate specimens at the Aquarium in Battery Park, but in the zoological world she is fast gaining a reputation as the leading authority in the country on fish diseases. She is doing pioneer research work in fish pathology and is one of the first scientists in the country to publish the reports of her findings.

All this being the case, she leads a busy life, for she has under her care some 5,000 fishes and other animals which compose the aquatic family which makes its home in the Aquarium. And she finds that her job is not altogether different from that of the doctor who ministers to human ills.

Charlie, the Galapagos penguin, gets bronchitis. One of the turtles has a tumor. The spade fishes lose their eyesight. The long-nosed gars have "lice." A new batch of gold fishes which have just arrived, are afflicted with a variety of diseases - dropsy, tumors, goiters, or Just plain garden variety colds.

Yes, colds. We were right the first time, for fishes, even as human beings, catch cold.

"Don't think," says Miss Mellen, "that just because a fish lives in water he isn't sensitive to temperature. Of course, it is obvious that he won't catch cold by getting his feet wet, but he will catch cold if he goes too near the surface of the water and gets in a direct draft from an open window or door. This is, especially true of baby fishes."

"A sick fish will be listless. He won't swim about much, but will rest near the bottom of the tank or perhaps, if he is very sick, he will rise to the surface. When he begins to turn on his back with his stomach up, he is dying. Sometimes a sick fish will hold himself in a position perpendicular to the bottom of the tank."

Until Miss Mellen began her researches, there were but two standard methods of treating fishes - a salt water bath for all those who exhibited



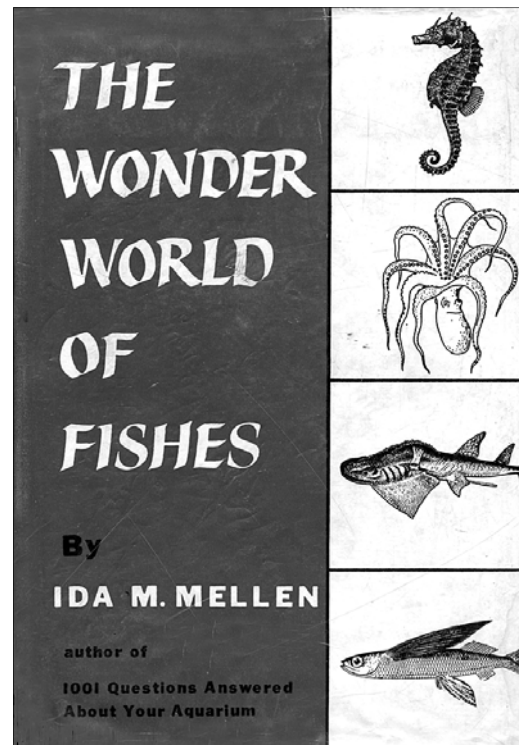
general symptoms and a permanganate of potassium bath for those who exhibited bruises or infections.

But now, thanks to Miss Mellen, the fish's apothecary shop must contain everything from castor oil to kerosene. She describes the castor oil treatment in a recent number of the Zoological Society's BULLETIN.

"On July 23 we came into possession of twenty of the very worst specimens of gold fishes ever brought into the New York Aquarium. They could not have lived a week and were suffering from plant and animal parasites, tail rot, dropsy, pop eye, abrasions and inflamed red spots on various parts of the body, sore eyes and a disease known as the 'black fungus' - which, under the microscope, proved to be not at all as shocking as it sounds, for it was, to all appearances, nothing more than a disturbance of pigmentation. Sixteen of the twenty were completely cured and ready to go on exhibition a month later.

"From the gills backward, some of the specimens were dipped first into turpentine and then into fifty percent solution of peroxide of hydrogen. On others only the peroxide was used. Three specimens were badly swollen and one of these recovered after swallowing (under protest) a teaspoonful of castor oil. The fish was held upright with a wet rag wound around the gills to prevent contact of air with the gills and also to prevent ejecting the oil through the gills. The oil was then dropped into the mouth. This dosing requires patience, for the fish will hold the oil in his mouth for five minutes or more, hoping to get back into the water and spit it out. By waiting until he gives up hope and is obliged to swallow it, our efforts are rewarded - by a well fish a few days later. Fish psychology is very simple. You don't need to psychoanalyze your patient in order to cure him of his fixations."

All of which prompt a revengeful thought - may the codfish sometime be forced to take this castor oil treatment, just by way of getting back



*The Wonder World of Fishes*, published in 1951. This was a revision of *The Young Folks' Book of Fishes* first published in 1927. In spite of this earlier title that suggested this was a children's book, it was an introduction to fishes intended for readers of all ages (in the book Mellen quotes Ausonius, a Latin poet of the fourth century).

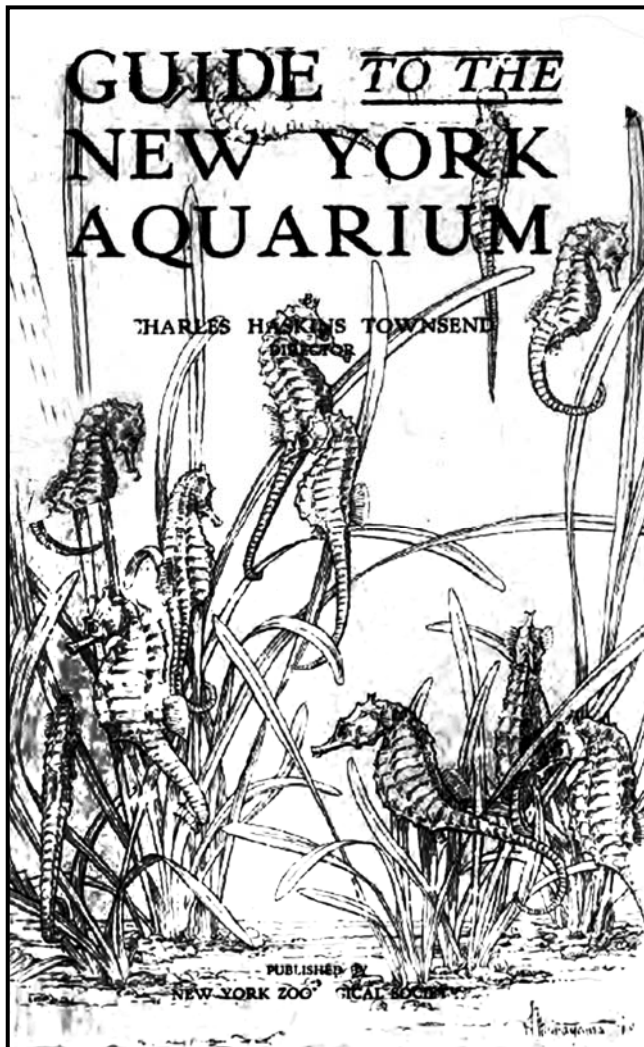
at them for all the cod liver oil with which they have afflicted humanity.

The operating table which Miss Mellen uses when surgical treatment is necessary is nothing more nor less than a large white enamel pan sufficiently long and deep to accommodate the patient. No anesthetics are used. An attendant holds the patient's head under water and the portion to be operated on above the water, and Miss Mellen wields her tiny, shining instruments. When she is through she paints the wound with antiseptic and the patient is put aside in a nice quiet tank to convalesce.

One of her most recent patients was Charlie, the penguin, who was brought from Galapagos

several years ago by William Beebe and presented to the museum. As Charlie is the only penguin they have down there at the Aquarium they think a lot of him. He is the best drawing card in the house. When he struts his stuff in the round pool in the center of the building there isn't even standing room.

This winter Charlie developed bronchitis. He drooped and languished and refused to perform,



The 1919 Guide to the New Aquarium in which Mellen contributed sections on small saltwater aquaria and on salamanders and frogs. Mellen came a long way in the little over two years she had been at the Aquarium. Mellen made numerous corrections to Townsend's text.

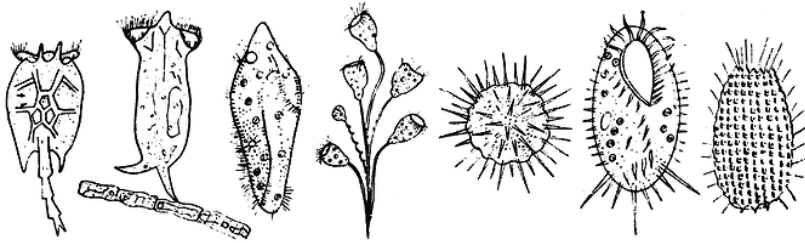
and lost two pounds, about thirty percent of his entire weight. Miss Mellen removed him to her office and poured cough medicine down his throat. Later he was made to inhale fumes of benzoin. After three weeks of this treatment Charlie was returned to his public, completely cured.

Last summer when an epidemic of blindness ravaged the spade fishes and the angel fishes Miss Mellen made an epoch-making discovery in the treatment of fish diseases. The angel fishes and the spade fishes, you will remember if you have ever been to the Aquarium, for they are among the most beautifully colored of the inmates and they always draw a full house.

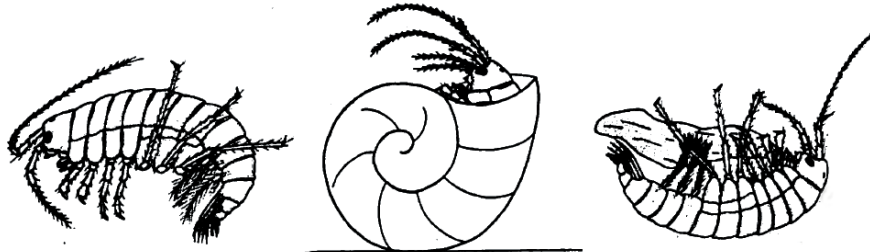
Consternation reigned, therefore, when it was discovered that a mysterious disease was attacking their eyes and completely destroying the sight. It was found that the eyeball was being eaten out by a parasitic fluke. After experimenting with boracic acid, argyrol and other kindred remedies used on human beings, Miss Mellen dipped the ailing fish into a solution of silvol - and found much to her surprise that it not only killed the flukes and saved the fishes' sight but it destroyed other parasites attached to fins, healed sore spots and soothed bruises. It proved to be almost a panacea and is now widely used in the treatment of many fish diseases.

Just by way of paying tribute to the work of Miss Mellen in this instance, a fellow scientist suggested that the terrible fluke, which had never before been described, be named after her. And scientists, being what they are, saw nothing untoward in attaching the name of a personable young woman to an ugly worm that eats out the eyes of beautiful and innocent fishes.

Miss Mellon had scarcely restored the spade fish to health and sight when the long nosed gars fell ill of "lice" - or to quote a more scientific term, crustacean parasites called argulids. Experimentation showed that it was difficult to find anything to kill the "lice" which would not at the same time kill the gars. Finally, after weeks of labor, Miss Mellen placed one of her patients in a



LEFT: The common food of baby fishes (the first two are rotifers, the next five are Infusoria known as Slipper Bell, Sun, Mussel and Animalcules). All drawings by Ida M. Mellen.



GRAMMARUS SHRIMP: Left, long legs thrown over back; Middle, In possession of a snail's shell; Swimming with a bit of food. All drawings by Ida M. Mellen

solution of mercurochrome for five hours. When he came out his usual neutral coat was a bright scarlet, but he was minus "lice." An overnight rest in clear water brought him back to normalcy in color and feeling - the treatment had proven entirely effective.

Gold fishes are not infrequent sufferers from what is sometimes described in human beings as a nervous breakdown. In the latter species it is usually occasioned by misfortunes in love. In the gold fish it has a less romantic cause and is due to failure of the slime organs to function properly. In either case the disease manifests itself in a general feeling of debility and a willingness to die whenever the occasion offers. But the cold fish, unlike the human being, finds a much easier remedy. He doesn't need to take a long rest or take up settlement work. For him the problem is much simpler. He merely takes a 90-second bath in a bucket of kerosene and rinses off in salt water and in ten days he is ready to go back before the public and do his stuff.

Miss Mellen acts not only as house physician to the Aquarium inmates, but she is also unofficial consulting physician for many "private" patients in front parlor aquaria throughout the city. She receives between twenty and thirty telephone calls, letters and visitors a day inquiring for information regarding the treatment of sick fishes, turtles, baby alligators and other aquatic animals.

Some of the inquiries, however, are of a more controversial nature. She is often called upon by the Jewish section of the population to tell whether a certain kind of fish has scales or not, for orthodox Jews do not eat fish without scales. It is not kosher.

Many of the requests for information relate to the whale, for Fundamentalists, standing by the literal interpretation of the Bible, are constantly seeking scientific basis for their belief. The famous episode of Jonah causes them much trouble. Would it not be possible, they write in, "for a whale to swallow a man?"

"I always point out," Miss Mellen replies, "that it would be quite possible for the whale to take a man into it a mouth. There was once a whale caught in whose mouth eleven men could stand. But its throat was only about four inches wide. It might be that Jonah's whale did make the experiment of swallowing a man, but apparently he did not find it profitable, for it has never been accomplished since."

Many people of esthetic tastes and ample pocketbook prefer to have their fishes match their draperies. This has led to the importation of many of the more highly colored tropical species. These range in price from \$1.50 a pair for guppies to \$35 apiece for the aristocratic Brazilian Half Moon, with his beautiful markings of silver and brown and his entrancingly graceful movements in the water.

An article in AMERICAN MAGAZINE in 1936 summed up her achievements in this area as follows:

“Ida Mellen is probably America’s first professional fish doctor. Her patients swim in all 48 states and 26 foreign countries. When a guppy or goldfish runs a fever, its owner writes or calls on her. For fishes with colds she prescribes doses of castor oil. Clears up skin disorders with mud baths. Removes tumors from turtles with embroidery scissors. Other surgical instruments employed include mouth props, pliers, tweezers and scalpels. Her operating room is a large enamel pan.”

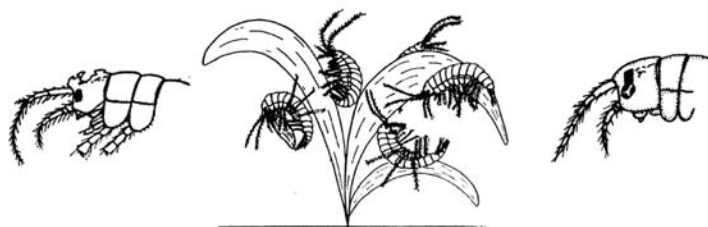
In 1927, Mellen first noticed an outbreak of one of the fish parasites popularly known as “flukes” from a spadefish (Ehippidae) and an angelfish (Pomacanthidae) in the New York Aquarium. It was subsequently named in her honor, i.e., *Epibdella* (now *Neobenedenia*) *melleni*. As the most common species, *N. melleni* causes problematic disease in public aquariums and in cultivated fish. In his review of this group of parasites, Ian D. Whittington of the South Australian Museum remarked,

“Ida Mellen, a zoologist of note herself, probably had no inkling that her namesake monogenean would become a parasite of such notoriety!”

In previous years, the New York Aquarium, like other public aquaria, suffered the loss of major exhibits to tuberculosis and pneumonia. In 1926, after consulting with the New York Zoo veterinarian, and doing some experimenting, Mellen successfully cured Charlie the penguin, the last of the Galapagos penguins brought to

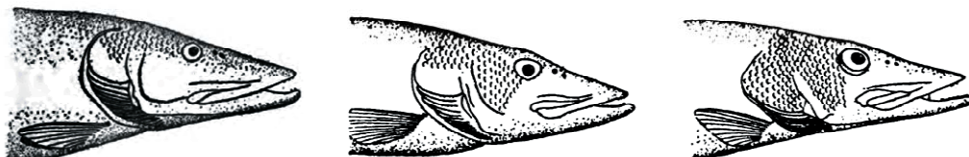
the Aquarium by William Beebe, of pneumonia and became a media sensation as the “the only woman in the world who is a physician and surgeon of fish.” The ability to maintain penguin (and other marine mammals) exhibits throughout the year was a huge boon to public aquariums, and the cost of keeping these creatures healthy proved to be little more than vigilance, time, space heaters and a bottle of children’s cough syrup. Mellen’s ability to save ailing exhibits, and her written work on curing fish diseases, brought her to the attention of both private and professional fish enthusiasts seeking to save their animals from death. But this was only one way in which Mellen became known to a wider public.

Raymond Carroll Osburn, the first assistant director of the Aquarium under Townsend, started many programs aimed at school-aged children. He focused mainly on educating students on the construction and maintenance of their own aquaria for at-home learning. In 1914 the New York Aquarium Nature Series published Osburn’s, “The Care of Home Aquaria.” The 63 page pamphlet was available at the Aquarium and became popular with visitors. In addition to the pamphlet, Osburn helped install over 300 aquariums in public school classrooms throughout New York City, the aquariums provided by the Board of Education and the water and specimens by the Aquarium. These aquariums contributed to Townsend’s desire to advance the “nature study” movement in New York City.



**LEFT, GRAMMARUS SHRIMP:** A victim of cannibals, showing the manner in which the murderers began. **MIDDLE:** Enjoying the vegetation. The specimen at the left has found something to eat, hanging himself up by three of his long legs and proceeding to dispatch the tidbit. **Head of new-born young showing 7 segments to each antenna, 3 large eye-spots and the connection of the eye with the brain ganglion.** All drawings by Ida M. Mellen.

**RIGHT, PIKE HEADS:** Arrangement of scales. Drawings by Ida M. Mellen.



Osburn left the Aquarium in 1914 for a job at Ohio State University and Mellen took up where he left off. Using new methods, she sought to build the reputation of the Aquarium and to secure its place as the main resource for learning in the Greater New York City area. Mellen continued and added to both of Osburn's programs. Some of her first forays outside of the library focused on leading small classes of students through the exhibits. Mellen expanded these duties by stocking classroom aquaria with new and fascinating specimens and providing packages of materials for study. In May and June of 1921, the ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN devoted two entire issues to the keeping of small home aquaria, both written exclusively by Ida Mellen. These issues proved popular and quickly sold out. The Aquarium later reissued them as a pamphlet entitled, "Fishes in the Home." In addition to teaching school-aged children, Mellen focused on their instructors. In 1926, an announcement was placed in the circular to district superintendents and principals that Mellen would personally lead six to eight school teachers through the Aquarium at 10 AM on Saturday mornings to "explain the biological and other special aspects of the exhibits, so that the teachers in turn could explain the exhibits to their pupils."

Mellen utilized media outlets and new technologies to reach students and teachers unable to visit the Aquarium. In 1923, Mellen wrote 24 nationally syndicated articles entitled "What do you not know about fishes?" These articles focused on everyday knowledge about fish that the general public might find interesting, interspersed with anecdotes and observations from her daily work.

Mellen gave her first public radio talk in 1922 on WJZ in Newark, New Jersey. WJZ was only in its second year of broadcasting and was one of the first stations to broadcast in New York City; science broadcasting was still in its infancy. Mellen's radio talks followed a similar format to her newspaper articles, i.e., biological and anecdotal information about fish and mammals found at the Aquarium.

In her talk on "The Dreadful Shark" she covered the natural history of sharks, their supposed habits and



**Louis Leon Arthur Mowbray (1877-1962). Director of the South Boston Aquarium, he was fired in 1914 for "inefficiency and conduct injurious to the discipline of the Park Department. Mowbray was the in-house roué of the New York Aquarium during his stay 1914 to 1921 and 1925 and was responsible for the greatest friction between Townsend and Mellen.**

habitats, and also included a recounting of a method employed for killing sharks following naval ships. Mellen's use of the radio did not pick up again until the 1925-1926 year when she gave 18 talks for WEAJ and 4 for WJZ, both broadcast stations owned by NBC. For example, she gave talks on WEAJ on the following subjects: "The New York Aquarium and its denizens," "Goldfishes and the care of fishes in captivity," "Carps and sea horses," "Fishes that make noises and some that can live out of the water," "Eels and flounders," "Pike, pickerel and muskellunge and how to tell them apart," "Pacific salmon," "Fishes that bring forth their

young alive and those that build nests and defend their young,” “Gars and mudfish,” “How much does a fish know?,” “Sharks,” “Poisonous and dangerous fishes and fishes of the deep sea,” “Disappearing sturgeon, depleted by over-fishing, and sardines and herrings that no amount of fishing can exterminate,” “What do fishes eat?,” “What is the fastest fish in the sea?” and “Why is a fish?” A concluding talk was in answer to the common question, “Is a whale a fish?” WEAFF requested a repeat of the series, with the addition of talks on “Sea Birds” and “Seals and Sea lions.”

In the 1926–1927 year, she gave talks for WEAFF, WJZ and 18 talks that Townsend reported were utilized by public school biology teachers throughout New York City. In addition to her newspaper and radio presence, Mellen utilized an even newer technology for such public education: the motion picture. Though the films have not survived, in 1928 Mellen made four motion pictures at the Aquarium, including a very early “talking picture.” Little evidence of these pictures survives in Mellen’s records but a letter from Catalina, California in 1929 states that the film was shown at a local theater. Little is known about these films; Townsend merely

refers to them in the Annual Report as “educational motion picture films.” What we do know is that these films were very early science education films, and that Mellen was utilizing the newest technologies available to extend the reach of the Aquarium beyond Battery Park and even beyond the state of New York. In 1921, Ida Mellen wrote two issues of the New York Zoological Society’s BULLETIN (Volume. XXIV, Number 3, May 1921 and Volume XXIV, Number 4, July 1921), a first for any author of the BULLETIN. At the time.

Under the title, “Fishes in the Home” in the May issue, Mellen covered goldfishes, setting up an aquarium, tadpoles and snails, infusoria, natives fishes including minnows, killifishes, mud minnow, darters, sticklebacks, sunfish and allies, dace and dace chub sucker, bowfin, eels, catfishes, common roach, shiners, and European fishes including the bitterling, the weatherfish, tench and ide. Thirty photographs and four drawings (the latter by Mellen) accompanied the descriptions. Mellen’s drawings were always of professional quality.

Under the title, “Tropical Toy Fishes,” in the June issue, in addition to an introduction outlining the special care of tropical fishes, Mellen covered (and I will retain the scientific names as were used at the time) the guppy, *Gambusia*, mollies, swordtails and their hybrids, platys, *Haplocheilus*, *Rivulus flabellicauda*, *Januarius*, *Heterandria formosa*, *Jordanella floridae*, the chanchito, *Acara bimaculata*, angelfish, *Hemichromis bimaculatus*, *Cichlasoma nigrofasciatum*, *Haplochromis strigigena*, *Pyrrhulina filamentosa* and *australis*, *Dormitator*, the paradise fish, the gourami, bettas, the climbing perch, *Anableps*, the butterfly fish danios, barbs, *Badis badis* and *Polycentrus schomburgki*. She also included sections dealing with what kind of fishes could be placed together, how to breed meal worms and a detailed section on the care of sick fishes (prevention, injuries, fungus, parasites tail rot gill



This image of Mellen and an accompanying article appeared in THE SARATOGIAN, January 30, 1928 with the title, “Only Woman Fish Physician.”

congestion, indigestion, and generally incurable diseases). Twenty eight photographs accompanied the descriptions, many of them by Ernst Bade.

### THE TOWNSEND/MELLEN CLASH

The Director of the Aquarium during Mellen's tenure, Charles Haskins Townsend, authored several "Guide to the New York Aquarium" booklets, the annual reports of the Aquarium, *THE PUBLIC AQUARIUM* (published by the Bureau of Fisheries in 1928), and edited and wrote much of the material for the *ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN*. Townsend, however, had a great deal of difficulty with his writing. In 1905, William Hornaday, his peer at the New York Zoological Society and Director of the Bronx Zoo, complained to Madison Grant, the Chairman of the Executive Committee (the Zoo and the Aquarium were both operated by the Society) that Townsend's Annual Report copy needed two day's hard work – paragraphing was bad, capitalization was erratic – and suggested that it be sent back to the Aquarium's director to be rewritten. Mellen was a godsend to Townsend since she corrected and re-wrote much of his work after her arrival at the Aquarium.

Townsend's publications, about 100 titles in all, were mainly devoted to fisheries, fur seals, whaling and oceanography but he also published several papers on birds. In fact, Charles M. Breder, Jr., Townsend's successor at the Aquarium, always felt that Townsend was "at heart an ornithologist and he gave me the impression that he rather disliked fishes." Henry Fairfield Osborn (then President of the New York Zoological Society) and Grant wanted the Aquarium to become a center for science but this was an uphill battle with Townsend who boasted to a newspaper reporter when he retired that he had never used a microscope.

After Washington W. I. DeNyse, the last survivor of the first two assistants hired in 1896 to take care of the exhibits died in 1921, Ida Mellen, along with the tank men, in effect was running the Aquarium. Indeed, because of the high visibility she had attained as a result of her radio talks, lectures and publications, both the public and the scientific community regarded her as the head of the Aquarium. When visitors arrived and asked to see the Director they were astonished to find out it was not she. Mellen would tell them she was not the Director and the usual reply was, "Well, we don't know him, it's you we came to see." In their 1931 book, "New York Is Everybody's Town," Helen Joseph and Mary Margaret McBride described Ida Mellen thusly:

"In our early newspaper days we learned about eels from Miss Ida Mellen of the New York Aquarium, a lady who knows more of fish and near-fish than anybody in New York. Eels, incidentally, are strange migratory creatures with curious mating habits. We also saw the Aquarium under Miss Mellen's guidance and for days were a mine of voluntary information on the length of life, value as food, and habitats of giant turtles, alligators, pig-fish, sea lions and sharks."

As a consequence, Mellen knew many of the important political figures of the day and it was she



**LEFT: Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia (1882-1947).  
RIGHT: Robert Moses (1888-1981). Mellen knew many important people in New York City. It was she who suggested to Robert Moses that a new aquarium be built in Coney Island, its present site.**

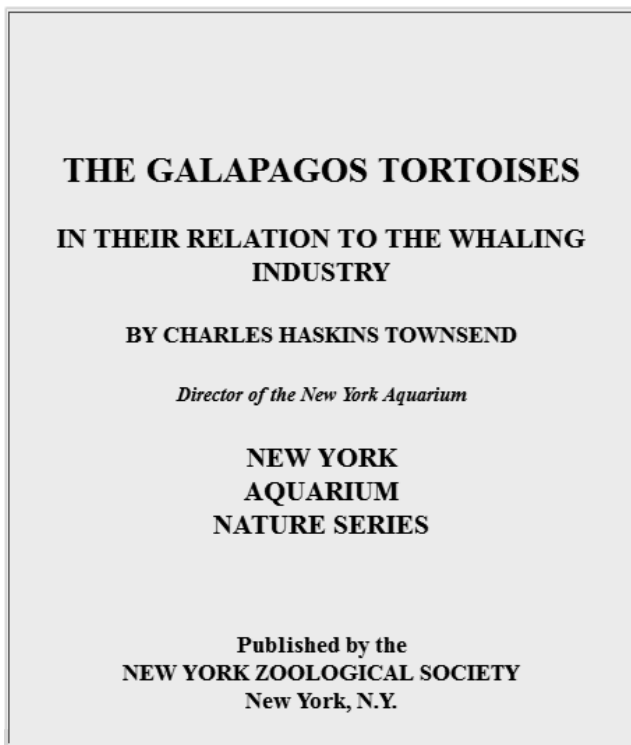
who suggested to Robert Moses, the “master builder” of mid-20th century New York City, that a new Aquarium should be built at Coney Island. Moses valued her opinion and because he usually got what he wanted, its present location, therefore, is largely due to her.

Mellen had a good working relationship with a wide network of aquarists and biologists. She corresponded with Walter Chute, the first director of the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, and their letters have a friendly familiarity and fraternal understanding of the stresses of running an aquarium. A letter from A. Remington Kellogg, a naturalist and a director of the United States National Museum, is equally as friendly as Ida thanks him for “the box of chocolate candies, and it seems to me that your claims of superiority for them are entirely

justified.” She sent him a double trout embryo in return. Her interactions with Charles Branch Wilson, an expert on copepods, were equally friendly and informal. In 1922, she solicited Wilson’s advice on how to remove parasites attacking her gar collections. His tongue in cheek response suggested employing expletives, to which Mellen replied “... will relieve the operator but will, unhappily, not relieve the gar...” These informal correspondences indicate a comfortable working relationship between colleagues.

Townsend, however, reacted to all this with an irrational jealousy, treating her in an offensive and detestable manner, spreading falsehoods about her along the way and taking credit for many of the things she did. On one occasion, for example, Townsend told his staff (whom he called “his boys”) that he would give anyone a substantial financial reward for a study of the natural foods of fishes. Mellen did the study and produced the paper, but Townsend not only credited Breder for the work, he went back on his promise and Mellen was never paid. Mellen did get even, however. She joined the American Fisheries Society who published her paper, “The Natural and Artificial Foods of Fishes,” cited previously. Again and again, Townsend promised raises to Mellen but gave them to others on his staff instead, and when she complained Townsend would say, “Well, I can’t give raises to everybody.”

In 1918, Mellen accused a female concessions worker of insolence and requested her dismissal. Mellen complained that the girl had an affair with Louis Mowbray and subsequently had an abortion, a real scandal in those days. Mowbray had been appointed in 1912 as the first Director of the South Boston Aquarium and in January of 1914 Mowbray was allotted \$1,500, the equivalent of about \$22,000 in today’s currency, to purchase fishes in Philadelphia. A month later he was fired for “inefficiency and conduct injurious to the discipline of the Park Department.” Reading between the lines, Mowbray either spent the funds without Park Department approval or else the Department was dissatisfied with how, or the manner in which, the



Reprinted from *ZOOLOGICA* v.4, no.3, 1925. In this monograph Townsend wrote: “The Executive Committee of the New York Zoological Society has signified its intention to procure if possible living specimens of Galapagos tortoises in the hope of averting the impending extinction of these animals.



funds were spent. Mowbray did not dispute the injurious conduct charge but demanded that the accusation of “inefficiency” be struck from his record as unfounded and misleading. The Park Department complied with his request but soon afterwards that year he left Boston to assume the position of Assistant at the New York Aquarium, leaving in 1921 to oversee the construction of the Miami Beach Aquarium where he was its director until it was sold in 1924. After another short stay (1925) at the New York Aquarium, this time as Chief Aquarist, he returned to his native Bermuda and went on to become curator of the Bermuda Aquarium until his death in 1952.

Townsend investigated the charges while Mellen was on vacation, going so far as writing the young woman’s physician but took no further action. Mellen persisted, stating the worker was “insolent and incompetent, and of a quarrelsome nature” and that she would not return to the Aquarium as long as “that creature” was still employed. Mellen went so far as to request a leave of absence. As the quarrel continued, Townsend became irritated by the situation. This is the only recorded incident in the Aquarium files, but it has been suggested that Mellen was a difficult individual. This statement, however, may have to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

For example, Breder related a story told to him by Louis Mowbray whom he referred to as “A woman-chaser like nobody ever saw. I mean, it was quite obvious all around the place. I won’t go into those stories [chuckling]. Mowbray told me one time, he said, we were grumbling about this Ida Mellen, which was her name, and what a troublemaker she was, and he said, “You know, some years ago, Townsend said, he said he’d give me fifty dollars if I’d take that woman out and give her what she needs. He [Mowbray] said, “It’d have to come much higher than that.” [laughs].”

In other words, according to Mowbray, Townsend and Breder, Ida Mellen was troublesome and this could be relieved by giving her “what she needs” by the “woman-chaser” of the Aquarium, the one previously accused of indiscretion in the workplace by



**Charles Haskins Townsend (1859-1944)**

Mellen. These sorts of sexist remarks do credit to none of these men, and their opinions are to be evaluated accordingly for what they are worth, which in my view is very little.

Although Townsend is touted for going to the Galapagos on a mission in 1928 on the Albatross II of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries to save the giant land tortoises, it was Ida Mellen who suggested that he go in the first place. Townsend, with inadequate preparation, rushed off without any specific objectives, much less on how to achieve them. Mellen was disappointed with the results, noting that rather than advancing the idea of conservation, all Townsend accomplished was to bring back 180 tortoises that in due course were distributed to the Canal Zone and Florida keys where they eventually disappeared), the Bermuda Aquarium, the San Diego, Houston, New Orleans and Bronx Zoos, and an arboretum in Arizona. What Mellen had in mind wasn’t to happen until 1959 when the Charles Darwin Foundation was founded with the primary objectives of ensuring the conservation of unique Galapagos ecosystems and promoting the scientific studies necessary to fulfill its conservation functions.

The following is a letter she wrote to Victor Wolfgang von Hagen (1908 – 1985), an American explorer, archaeological historian, anthropologist, and travel writer who traveled the South Americas with his wife, Christine. Mainly between 1940 and 1965, he published a large number of widely acclaimed books, one of which was “Ecuador the Unknown & the Galápagos Revisited.” In his 1935 island-to-island survey of the Galápagos, designed to form a base for a conservation program, he placed a monument to Darwin on San Cristobel Island where he first landed. Von Hagen subsequently wrote the Galapagos protective legislation for the National Assembly of Ecuador, unfortunately more a matter of form rather than substance. His publication of books and articles, as well as his lectures, did arouse international attention, but the war sank any project before it could be launched. The exchange is interesting in that it not only shows Ida Mellen’s foresight in the protection of the Galapagos, but also the defects of Townsend.

“February 28, 1941  
Dear Mr. von Hagen:

“In reading your book, *Ecuador The Unknown* (which I liked very much, like everything you write), I noticed that you said no one in the United States could be interested in protecting the Galapagos tortoises from enemies introduced on the islands.

“In 1923, while serving as Aquarist of the New York Aquarium, the subject of these tortoises came up, and the director, Charles Haskins Townsend, mentioned that about twenty years previously the New York Zoological Society had published a paper on it, in its Annual Report. I hunted up the report and started to read it, then put it down. Dr. Townsend said, ‘Did you read it?’ I said, ‘No, I couldn’t read it, it made me so sick to think the Zoological Society has known for twenty years how those animals are being exterminated and has not raised a finger to prevent it.’

“My idea took fire, and the next thing I knew Dr. Townsend was off for New Bedford to study the whaling records with respect to the destruction of the

tortoises; and then he persuaded the Society to send him to the islands.

“Just what was in his mind, if there was any special plan of action, I do not know. He took along no equipment to capture the animals, no objects to offer the natives in payment for aid in capturing them. The trip was very painful to the men he took along, as no preparations had been made for their comfort in the Galapagos. But as you doubtless know, he brought back some of the tortoises and planted them in our southern states. One of them actually laid an egg which hatched this year, I am told.

“Of course my idea was to save them *in situ*. To this day, however, the New York Zoological Society does not know that I ever had any interest in the matter. Townsend has been senile for years, and the officials of the Society have changed.

“I assume that you endeavored to interest the Society in your project of saving the animals where they are, and if so, I wonder if you would be good enough to tell me with whom you conferred in the matter, just for my personal information? It does seem strange they persistently refuse to take an interest in the proper method to pursue.

“I shall be grateful for anything you may care to tell me.

“Sincerely,  
Ida M. Mellen”

The following was von Hagen’s reply:

“Dear Miss Mellen,  
It is, indeed, nice to have your letter.

“The Galapagos matter has been on my mind for years and I am glad that you too have thought deeply on the matter. It is one of the blackish marks on the escutcheon of American science. Particularly of the New York Zoological Society, the American Museum of Natural History and the International Wild Life Society.

“I knew Dr. Townsend. His enthusiasm was boundless; his ability to help, hopeless. I went to Vincent Astor, Gifford Pinchot, Lord Moyné. I pointed out that they in their collecting helped bring about the situation as it exists to-day. I received no encouragement. In Ecuador, I prepared the way for the work by writing and having passed Laws that PERMITTED foreign intervention on their islands. I wrote to every one. Only in England was there an encouragement – and war has prevented any aid from there. I realized at once that the battle was beyond my purse.

“My plan was simple, and very inexpensive to operate. There was money needed – not too much – to begin the station, after that it could be self-operating. I even got the Grace Line to agree – in principle – that if we set up a station, made a sort of zoological garden on the islands, had student-guides to assist; they would run boats out there on excursion and give a notable amount of money toward the Station’s maintenance. I have a whole dossier of papers, letters, plans, to the minutest degree. Like Bolívar, I might say ‘I have ploughed the Sea.’

“At the Zoo I talked to Ditmars and Crandall (both powerless). I talked to Beebe, Fairfield Osborn and Townsend. I was patted on the head. I was not helped. When every thing is extinct on the islands (the tortoises are not fertile in captivity), when the birds are gone – the flightless cormorant, the penguin, the flamingo, even the lowly finch – my papers will make sad reading.

“I will be only too happy to talk on the program of Miss Joan Dare. Please have her get in touch with me through my publishers when I come to New York in the fall.

“Again, my sincere and deepest thanks for your interest. I only wish there was something we can do before it is too late. Some other of my books have appeared, and I am taking the liberty of putting their announcement in this letter.

“Sincerely yours,  
Victor Wolfgang von Hagen”

In 1929 Townsend was 70 years old. He took little part in the day-to-day decisions about the management of the Aquarium and his behavior had taken an eccentric turn. Because of this, Mellen was approached by several influential people requesting her permission to approach the President of the New York Zoological Society with the object of persuading him to retire Townsend and replace him with Mellen. This she refused to do, remarking that she wanted Townsend to finish his tenure at the Aquarium. This was partly because of compassion on her part for Townsend but also because the situation of women at this time was vastly different from that today and would have placed Mellen in an even more uncomfortable position at the Aquarium. The glass ceiling at the New York Zoological Society was so firmly in place that no woman could ever expect to achieve the level of Director of the Aquarium. For example, when Townsend made his trip to the Galapagos in 1928, although Mellen had seniority, it was Breder who was appointed Acting Director.

William Emerson Damon, a pioneer in the history of the aquarium hobby in America, had been one of the first to campaign for a public aquarium in New York City and was one of the original members of the Society’s aquarium committee in 1902. The most important of Ida Mellen’s initiatives during her last year at the Aquarium was to prevail upon his widow, Mrs. Alma C. Damon, to make a donation to the New York Zoological Society, the income from the amount – \$10,000 (equivalent to about \$114,000 today) – to be in memory of her husband. The following is the letter of proposal giving credit to Mellen:

“April 8th, 1927  
New York Zoological Society  
101 Park Avenue  
New York, New York

“Gentlemen:  
Knowing the great interest of my late husband, William Emerson Damon, in the subject, Miss Ida M. Mellen of the Aquarium, has suggested to me that I give, as a memorial to him, a trust fund of ten

thousand dollars to your society, in trust to invest the principal and to use the income thereof for the maintenance and support of balanced aquaria with pigmy fishes, to be designated "The William Emerson Damon exhibit," the trust to cease and the entire principal fund to revert to me or, after my decease, to my heirs, when and if a substantial failure has occurred and continued for a period of three years to use the said income for maintenance and support of such balanced aquaria with pigmy fishes.

"I am prepared to establish such a trust fund for the purposes and upon the conditions stated immediately upon the complete and proper preparation of suitable space in the balcony of the Aquarium Building in Battery Park, ready for the installation and public exhibition of such balanced aquaria.

"Will you be so kind as to advise me whether the establishment of such a trust fund of ten thousand dollars would be acceptable to you.

"Very truly yours,  
Mrs. Alma Otis Damon"

Although this was a significant bequest, it would have been closer to \$15,000-\$25,000 had Mellen acceded to Mrs. Damon's request that Ida consent to be the curator of the exhibition. This she declined to do, feeling that it would be interpreted as soliciting the donation for her own benefit when that was far from her intention.

**BREDER AND MELLEN:  
THE BEGINNING OF THE  
END**

Ida Mellen's tenure at the Aquarium coincided with a time of professional and institutional changes at the

Aquarium. Charles Townsend joined the struggling Aquarium when it became semi-private in 1902. Originally a public aquarium, fading funds forced the city of New York to bring in the New York Zoological Society. When Townsend took over, the physical plant of the Aquarium was in dire straits. At the time of new-moon tides, the sea water rose so high in the boiler and pump rooms that the stokers had to wear hip boots while shoveling wet coal into the furnace from half-submerged wheelbarrows. Sometimes the pumps were flooded and the fires extinguished, so that there was no heat or circulating water until the tide fell. Four days' coal was all the Aquarium had room to store, and when the Commissioner of Parks ordered the unsightly coal shed removed, the margin dropped to two days. In the winter of 1917 the building had to be closed to visitors for several days and the living collections would probably have been lost had it not been for twenty-five tons' emergency supply of coal long hidden in an underground pipe conduit.

In 1921 the executive committee of the New York Zoological Society decided that conditions at the Aquarium really were intolerable, that the city was not going to act and that after nineteen years perhaps the Society owed something to its foster child. It



**Charles Marcus Breder, Jr. (1897-1965).**

voted \$75,000 for new pump and boiler rooms and larger exhibition tanks as “a gift from the Society to the City of New York.” Then, as promptly as if all along it had been waiting for such a gesture, the city voted \$86,000 for the enlargement of the second story, modifications along the front of the building, and the addition of a third story.

The Society’s money was expended promptly and the director’s annual report for 1921 was a proud showcase for photographs of the new pump rooms and boiler room. The city’s part of the work proceeded more spasmodically; it was not until 1926 that the second and third floors were finished, the second given over to water distribution tanks and shops and the third to offices, a library, and a laboratory. Now the collections could be expanded by about a fifth, and the new offices allowed Townsend and his small staff to move back into the Aquarium from the basement room in Pearl Street which they had occupied while reconstruction was going on. The New York Zoological Society, in charge of financing collection and maintenance of exhibits, also now wanted Townsend to make the Aquarium a center for scientific studies.

After Townsend’s longtime Assistant Director died, Charles M. Breder, Jr. was brought from the United States Bureau of Fisheries to fill his position. During Townsend’s extended and lengthening absences, Breder functioned as the Acting Director. Breder sought to emphasize laboratory science when speaking to the public, and to deemphasize hobbyist concerns and small aquarium keeping. This new emphasis greatly affected Mellen’s place at the Aquarium.

Breder was a self-made biologist. He once was reported to have said that everything he knew about biology and ichthyology at the time he got his first job he had learned at the Newark Public Library. In fact, Breder was a 22 year old youth with a high school education when he was hired as a scientific assistant by the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries. (His doctorate was an honorary one that was awarded to him in 1938 by the University of Newark, now the Newark campus of Rutgers University.) Breder

accepted the position at the Aquarium in 1921 on the hopes that he would be allowed greater access to a laboratory and greater freedom with research there.

Breder and other ichthyologists have suggested that Townsend was decidedly anti-laboratory. According to an interview conducted by William Bridges with Breder in 1975, Breder believed that Townsend valued “naturalists” over “scientists”: “There was a sharp cleavage. And naturalists didn’t attempt to explain things, they described things.” This particular refrain has been heard before in the history of science, but it is clear what Townsend believed the cleavage between scientist and naturalist entailed: “And he included in this [division]...that describing things didn’t mean describing things for your fellow naturalists but describing them for the general public or for anybody. And these scientific people were a thing apart. They were not the same breed at all, you see. I didn’t find this out until after I’d taken the job...”

According to Breder, the distinction between Townsend’s and his approach was not the production of knowledge but the audience. Townsend believed that the goal of the public aquarium was to speak directly to the public in terms that they understood. Breder’s concern regarding the Aquarium’s message to the visiting public was focused on what he perceived of as unprofessional and outdated approaches to aquatic subjects. In the 1975 interview, Breder showed his frustration with that message, stating “I don’t know how we allowed talking to classes of schoolchildren about how to fix up a home aquarium. I vaguely remember, and this is not a clear memory, arguing with him one time that the day’s gone by for that sort of thing. Any of these aquarium stores will tell you what to do, and there’s countless little handbooks on how to set up an aquarium.” This interview is demonstrative of the larger concerns about the roles of public science institutions and their duty to the public that were circulating at the time. Breder’s concern that “the day’s gone by for that sort of thing” spelled not only a sea change for the Aquarium’s interaction with the public, but also a change involving the staff. If laboratory work was the incoming trend for

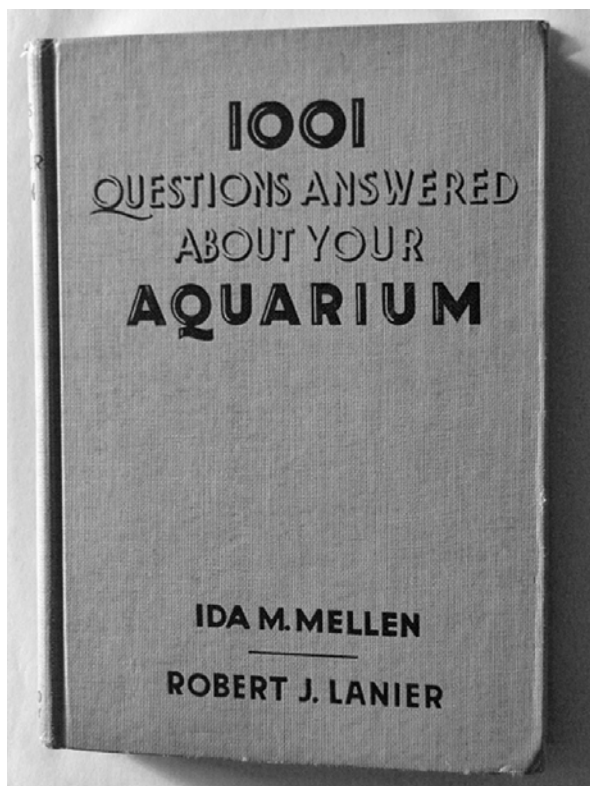
aquarists, many employees – including Ida Mellen – would be left behind.

By 1929, Charles Townsend had given up most pretenses of being the active director of the Aquarium. Although his retirement was not official until 1937, Charles Breder was the acting director and made most decisions regarding the day-to-day running of the Aquarium. In 1927, a new state-of-the-art laboratory was established at the Aquarium, and Breder utilized this facility to bring in researchers from the surrounding area, and to strengthen the Aquarium as a center for laboratory research.

As Breder strengthened the experimental aspect of

aquarist work, he sought to emphasize this new turn in conversations with the public. In early 1929, Ida Mellen announced that she would be leaving the Aquarium. At the time, little was said about why Mellen left her position, but several sources suggest that Breder pushed Mellen out for various reasons.

In her personal correspondence, the majority of letters expressing concern about Mellen's departure suggested it was for reasons having to do with her gender. Elwin R. Sanborn, the long-time NYZS photographer wrote that he was not surprised by her retirement. He derided the process of "making a woman uncomfortable and unhappy" suggesting that Mellen left the aquarium for gendered reasons.



***1001 Questions Answered About Your Aquarium*, published in 1935, is arguably the best of all the aquarium books published in this country prior to World War II. Although Innes's *Exotic Aquarium Fishes*, which appeared in the same year, is often touted as being the best, the Mellen/Lanier book had far more information about aquarium fishes, and contained an extensive bibliography that the Innes book lacked.**

Mellen never speaks of the reason for her departure, nor does she confirm to whom Sanborne refers "making war on woman." In a 1975 interview Breder states clearly that he pushed Mellen out of the Aquarium: "[I] got rid of her [Mellen] pretty quick, as soon as he [Townsend] retired. And conditions were much better in the Aquarium because she was doing all kinds of underhanded things." Breder, however, never mentions what "underhanded things" Mellen was up to. Perhaps it was the fact that Mrs. Damon had contacted Mellen rather than himself (Alva Damon would certainly not have been happy with Breder's outlook on what a public aquarium should be), but in any event it is clear that he held no regard for her work.

When Breder wrote the Annual Report the year after Mellen left, he merely stated that Miss Ida M. Mellen resigned on May 1, 1929. "She had been in the employ of the Aquarium since October 9, 1916 in various capacities. Much needed stenographic and secretarial services are being rendered by Miss Jean Roddan. The Library is also under her supervision and various scientific drawings have been prepared by her for use in technical publications." Breder never referred to Mellen's status at the Aquarium, or her work with public education programs and animal health, instead implying that she merely performed secretarial or stenographic services during her employment. This is a degree of pettiness on Breder's behalf that borders on childishness. In any

event, setting aside her shabby treatment at the hands of the Aquarium's three male chauvinists, Mowbray, Townsend and Breder, even if Mellen was opinionated and stated her opinions assertively, this was a small price for the Aquarium to pay for her important contributions she made to that institution over the years she spent there.

Tired of her disgraceful treatment at the hands of Townsend and Breder, Mellen resigned and went on to pursue an active independent writing career for which she is well known in the aquarium hobby. Her 1935 book mentioned in the next section, "1001 Questions Answered About Your Aquarium," for example, is arguably the best of all the aquarium books published in this country before World War II. Had she not been forced out of the Aquarium by Townsend and Breder in 1929, there is no telling what Ida Mellen might have achieved there over the ensuing years.

### THE WRITING CONTINUES

After Mellen left the New York Aquarium, her subsequent career showed just how remarkable a woman she was. In addition to articles and essays, Mellen also published the following books:

- 1935:** *1001 Questions Answered About Your Aquarium* (with Robert J. Lanier), revised in 1953.
- 1939:** *A Practical Cat Book*.
- 1940:** *The Science and Mystery of the Cat*.
- 1941:** *Outstanding Members of the Mellen Tribe in America*.
- 1942:** *Twenty Little Fishes* (a child's book).
- 1951:** *The Wonder World of Fishes* (this was a revision of *The Young Folks' Book of Fishes*).
- 1952:** *The Natural History of the Pig*.

*1001 Questions* was co-authored with Robert J. Lanier, a former tank man at the New York Aquarium who went on to become Superintendent of the Steinhart Aquarium. It might be assumed that it was Mellen and Lanier who selected the goal of 1001 questions in their book (there are actually 1074 questions), but it was part of the Dodd Mead series that featured titles such as *1001 Questions Answered*



**FREYJA, THE NORSE CAT GODDESS**  
(from Mellen, *The Science and Mystery of the Cat*).

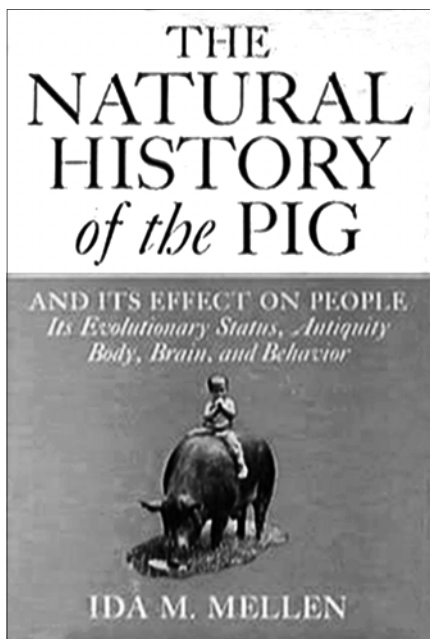
**Mellen stated that Norse maidens were married on Freyja's day (Friday) if possible, and if the sun shone during the ceremony it was said of them that they had taken good care of the cats and fed them well.**

About [Astronomy, Aviation History, Birds, Cooking, Earth Science, Flowers, History, Natural Land Disasters, Space, The Mineral Kingdom, Trees, etc.]. The following is taken from the Foreword and will sound alarmingly familiar to present-day aquarists:

"One aquarium suffices for those who maintain Goldfishes and native species, but with toy tropicals one aquarium leads to many. The fishes in the first aquarium spawn and another tank is purchased for the fry. Others spawn. Another tank. New and tempting species appear on the market and cannot be resisted. Another aquarium is added. Then one more. After all the rooms have been appropriated, the kitchen clock requires careful watching lest it disappear to make room for just one more coveted fish! Some wives have complained of alienation of affection by the Mollies, the Minnies, and the amorous "Goopies," but the hobby on the whole has done no harm. It has provided the man in the street with new in-terests in his home, and he is wiser who has made acquaintance with even a part of that great world of lower animals which inhabit a medium impossible for ourselves, their powers of adaptation and co-ordination, emotions, feeding and breeding habits, their hereditary and other traits. Many women are interested and expert aquarists, too; many women have kept balanced salt-water aquaria; but the fresh-water aquarium is largely a man's hobby. Aquarium keeping has popularized natural history, interested

every amateur aquarist in biological science and taught him, though protestingly, plenty of piscatorial Latin.”

An important milestone was her seminal article, “Tropical Toy Fishes,” published in March 1931 in THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE. The article was subtitled, “More than 600 Varieties of Aquarium Pigmies Afford a Fascinating Field for Zoölogical Study in the Home,” and occupied a choice location in the first third of the magazine. In addition to its 33 pages of text, it was accompanied with 20 photographs and eight drawings of fishes in color. Among her unpublished writings was a science fiction fantasy, “The Lady and the Turtle,” that concerned a young woman who swims down the Atlantic coast in the shell of a sea turtle, and a mystery story, “Who Shut the Window?” Additional brief bits of unpublished material include: “Biological Fairy Tale” (1910), “Your Mother and



**Mellen’s book on the pig dealt with everything from semantics, classification, nomenclature, distribution, domestication, breeding, and congenital defects. It is frequently referenced, one of the most recent being in a 1982 dissertation on the population biology and management of the wild pig in Maui.**

“Your Birthday” (1913), “The Interruption” (1913), “The Master – An Allegory” (1925), “The Little Bone Pig” (1923), “A Cross Section of Society as Revealed in the Writing of Cat Books” (1940), “The History of Genealogy and Some of Its Thrills” (1943), “What Can We Do for Cats?” (1944), “The Slender Present Hope for World Unity” (1946) and “What Became of the Body of Roger Williams? Or What I Don’t Know About Its Disappearance” (1948). A longer piece was “Country Experiment, A Page from an Autobiography,” consisting of 89 pages (1941), but a much larger undertaking was “Charming Men,” a 251-page manuscript consisting of biographical studies of twenty famous men ranging from the 7th to the 20th centuries (1958). Mellen was writing, therefore, well into her eighties.

Mellen also wrote sixty-eight published and unpublished poems arranged under the following subjects: Songs of the Orient, Birds and Beasts, Songs of Love, Songs of Ambition and Songs of Life. She even composed music for *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

It should be noted that on occasion she wrote both published and unpublished material under the pseudonyms of “George Otis” and “Esmeralda de Mar.” This was not unusual for the times, however, as even Walter L. Brind used a pseudonym when he wrote his articles for ALL-PETS MAGAZINE.

Finally, she also wrote a series of 24 newspaper articles, “What You Do Not Know About Fishes,” syndicated in the BROOKLYN EAGLE, NEWARK NEWS, and SPOKANE CHRONICLE. Mellen is listed in *Who’s Who in America*, Vol. 31, 1960-61, and in *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 7-8, 1963. All in all, she published over 200 articles and essays on a myriad of natural history subjects and on philosophy, language, psychology and eugenics.

### **AN AUTHORITY ON CATS**

Mellen was an acknowledged authority on the cat and her writings on the subject are still quoted to this day. She had a way with words reminiscent of Jane

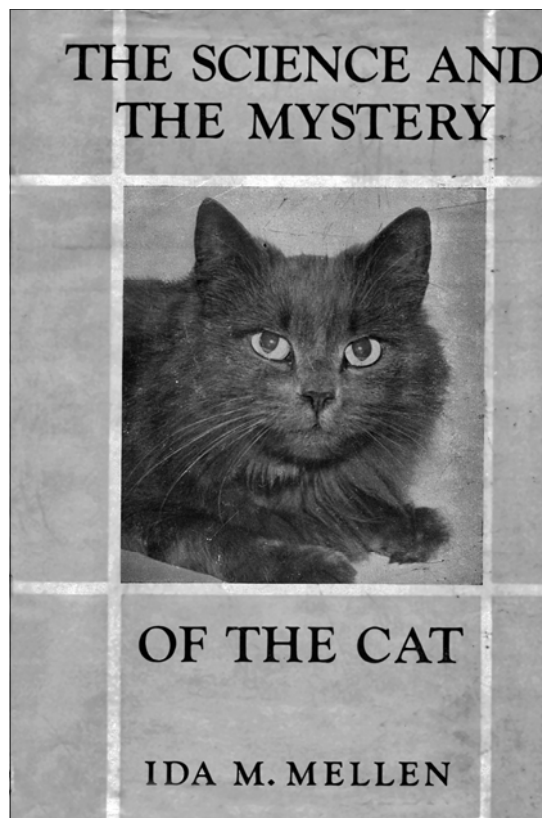


Austin, and one of her most oft-quoted observations is, “The cat, like the genius, draws into itself as into a shell except in the atmosphere of congeniality, and this is the secret of its remarkable and elusive personality.” She had close ties to the American Feline Society, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Anti-Cruelty Society.

Mellen is justifiably famous among the cat fancy for her two books, the first of which – *A Practical Cat Book for Amateurs and Professionals* – was published in 1939. The dedication in this book reads, “To the Memory of Lovey de Joy, the mother cat of my childhood who engendered my first love and admiration for cats and who was also responsible for my first scientific observations and experiments.” While a small girl, Mellen recorded the dates when Lovey de Joy’s kittens were born, how many there were, what colors they had, when they opened their eyes and when they lapped. Her indulgent mother permitted Ida to make her first scientific experiment on one of the kittens. She was allowed to borrow the whiskey bottle from the medicine cabinet (as she says, “...where even sober Puritan families like ours kept one against illness”), and to feed a kitten with whiskey and milk in order to determine whether it was true, as she had heard, that whiskey, imbibed by the young, would stunt their growth. The following is taken from the book:

“From the beginning of the experiment the kitten ceased to grow. It developed a peculiarly snakelike expression and died early. The old proverb has it that ‘Good liquer (sic) will make a cat speak,’ but the kitten never talked. Since then my experiments with cats, other than those covering special breeds, have been devoted to sustaining foods, right medicines, and the best methods of bringing out individual traits to illustrate variations in intelligence and character, memory and adaptation, etc. My opportunities to study cats have been limited to a period of 24 years. One would need to make uninterrupted studies for at least a century to discover all there is to know.”

In her acknowledgments she included P. Lechmere Guppy, Leon F. Whitney (about whom more will be



***The Science and Mystery of the Cat*, 1940. Along with *A Practical Cat Book*, 1939, these two books are among the best books ever published on the subjects. They are authoritative, well-written and contain extensive bibliographies.**

said later) and Dr. Hugh M. Smith. They all had strong ties to the aquarium hobby and/or its history. Plantagenet (Jim) Lechmere Guppy, for example, was one of the nine children of Robert John Lechmere Guppy, from whom the guppy gets its popular name. Regarding this son, in 1906 C. Tate Regan published a paper entitled, “On the fresh-water fishes of the Island of Trinidad based on the collection, notes and sketches made by Mr. Lechmere Guppy, Jr.” Guppy was in the service at the time to the government of Great Britain, and the idea of his collecting specimens of Trinidad fishes and of making extensive field notes and sketches was that of Edward G. Boulenger, the curator of reptiles and the aquaria at the London Zoo. Incidentally, although there are repeated references in the literature to Guppy being a clergyman, it wasn't true.

Some people were confused by the clerical-like collar he wore because he hated tying ties!

Her correspondence with Dr. Hugh M. Smith, the author of *The Fishes of Siam*, was with regard to the cats in that country and in particular the origin of the Siamese cat. Smith knew his cats as well as he did his fishes and remarked in a letter to Mellen, "A Siamese prince whom I know very well was visiting in London and was interviewed by one of the thousands of Siamese cat fanciers there. He told her there were more Siamese cats in London than in all Siam."

Her second cat book, *Science and the Mystery of the Cat*, was published the following year, in 1940. This book dealt not with keeping cats per se but with information about cats as is suggested by its subtitle, *Its Evolutionary Status, Antiquity as a Pet, Body, Brain, Behavior, So-called "Occult powers," and Its Effect on People*. The section on ancient worship of the cat deals in detail with its place in Egyptian religion but also with its importance in other cultures such as Norse mythology where we learn that Freyja, a goddess of love from whom the day of the week – Friday – was named, rode forth from her palace in a chariot drawn by two cats that symbolize the enjoyment of the senses. One excerpt of the book relevant to fishes is:

"Cats develop affections for rodents and will protect them from enemies. Singularly enough, if a cat is friendly toward a mouse or rabbit, this does not prevent it from discriminating between the friend and others, and it will go out and prey on the same species of animals which it finds wild, or capture them and take them home to display. The same applies to fishes. Captain Mahony says that Ben Turpin goes out to fish in the river, but at home he plays with the Channa (a Chinese walking fish) by poking his paw in the water in a tantalizing way, though never hurting the fish."

## MELLEN AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Mellen was very interested in words and in language in general. In an article in the November 1938 issue of WORDS titled "The Irish 'yiz'," she examined the word (as in "Have yiz no homes to go to?") as it

related to "youse" and similar constructions. In an article in AMERICAN SPEECH published in 1958 she asked:

"How long does it take a coined word to reach the dictionaries? When I wrote *The Natural History of the Pig*, Dr. Emmeline Moore, one of our foremost natural historians, coined for my new science the word 'porcinology,' which is printed in the Dedication, but it would be surprising if that word appeared in any dictionary during my lifetime or ever. Who's Who is willing to list me as an ichthyologist and felinologist, but deletes porcinologist from the biography last submitted because it will not use a term not to be found in Webster's."

The following, one of her earlier writings on language, appeared in AMERICAN SPEECH (*loc. cit*) and shows both this interest and her keen sense of humor:

### Naming the Bungalow

**My vacation last summer on a sand bar off the New York coast afforded me an excellent opportunity to observe the naming of the bungalows of a summer colony.**

**Many bungalows are named merely for people – Margaret, Mary Ann, Doris, Florence, etc., and one is known as Mike's Inn, another Catherlne; several are called Moms Inn, and one Twinsin.**

**Some express the joy of acquisition in such triumphant announcements as Tookalot, The Ownliwon, and Iona Bungalow.**

**Dun'L'Inn and Villa-de Luxe are high flown and also deeply humorous designation for homes on stilts.**

**Some of the legends invite the passerby inside, but the occupants would doubtless be astounded were the invitation accepted: Woonchacum Inn, Weelrite Inn, Wanacumin, U Kan Kum Inn, Tumble-In, Dip Inn, Unous, Kumhavarest.**

Others bespeak the light moods of summer holidays, with such signs as Kamp Takitezy, Hatetoleaveit, Iszatso, Seldom Inn, May Be Inn, Never Inn, Camp Lafalot, Camp Rest-A-Bit, Viol-Inn, Chick-Inn, Snooky's Inn, You Know Me Al, Justamere Home, and The Cat's Meow; and one sign bears the brightly painted face of an Hawaiian maiden, with the inscription Bunga Lou.

He who saunters past one strip of bungalows, comes upon the smiling legend Wendoweat. Just when this is satisfactorily deciphered, his eye falls upon another – set up as though by collusion – Damifiknow.

Another earlier interesting commentary by Mellen that appeared in AMERICAN SPEECH (*loc. cit*) is the following, although readers are warned that this one takes some decided concentration!

#### The Goldfish Puzzle

The late fad in the study of our noble mother tongue now known as the Goldfish Puzzle and the methods by which it may be reduced to letters have been given able consideration from the viewpoint of 'Speech Tunes and the Alphabet,' by Robert S. Gill in the October 1915 issue of AMERICAN SPEECH; and earlier examples of such alphabetical writing have been interestingly dwelt upon by Raymond Pearl, 'Dean Swift and the Goldfish,' in the March 1926 issue.

And now perhaps it will be of interest to consider the Goldfish Puzzle itself from the viewpoint of individual evolution; for this puzzle, since it arose mysteriously more than a year ago, has passed through many variations. It is of but one genus, possibly of but one species, but its variants are as curious as they are numerous. It entered my horizon as a two-line dialog, with explanations, as follows:

*Alphabetical Fish.*—Mr. Levy brought a bowl of goldfish home to his boy, Abie, and the following brief and illuminating colloquy ensued:

A B C D goldfish.  
L M N O goldfish.

Abie knew. He had tested 'm with acid.  
—*Ohio State Journal.*"

When it next reached my desk, it had cast off the explanations as superfluous, and evolved into the following:

A B C D Goldfish  
L M A N O  
Goldfish  
O S A R.

The next version was identical with the last excepting for the addition of two letters, A B, to the last line. This was succeeded by an addition more enterprising, for it fared into the field of numerals:

A B C D  
Goldfish  
L M A N O  
Goldfish  
O S A R A B  
2 U C M  
O S I C M

Along this line of descent the puzzle seems to have been completed by the following version, in which it expanded from two lines to fourteen:

A B C D  
Goldfish  
L M A N O  
Goldfish  
O S A R A B  
2 U C M  
O S I C M  
C F U C S I  
O G  
E S D R A B  
O S E S  
E S  
O I N O U; I C U N Woolworth's

Now it will be seen from Mr. Gill's version,  
a b c d goldfish  
l m n o goldfish  
o s a r goldfish  
d 1 a r goldfish  
m r sunfish

that the substance of, the puzzle has changed from one involving the 'acid test' (literal or



figurative) to a question of identification of species.

All these variations, as well as Dean Swift's letter to 1 n (*sic*), serve but to illustrate the wide range of subjects that can be covered without words if one is adept with the alphabet.

A paragraph by Martin Shepherd in the issue of JUDGE for April 30 belongs in the same group but is of a distinct genus.

**'V Know R Ps AND Qs!**

*'An SAi on E-Con-O-Me, by a Letter Laugher*  
It's EZ 4 U Ys 1s 2 4C the quick DK & ultimate DCs of the Western Union Telegraph Co. 4 if U R Ys, U will DV8 from custom, and Us the Letter Laugh System, which MN8s from JUDGE, whenever U do NE telegraphing or 4N cabling. U XPD8 matters by deleting XS letters. Letter Laugh telegrams R the SNs of FEçC. U will O less 2 the W.U.T. Co., 4 there is no D9 the MNCT of saving; & B4 all Ls, U must APs an M T purse by 4 -10-8 Us of common ç. NE 1, even an OBs head, should FUs over the FEKC of this system. V O JUDGE R thanks 4 this ID.'

Ida M. Mellen, *New York Aquarium*

### THE CORRESPONDENT

Whether to friends or newspapers, Mellen was an inveterate letter writer; her personal letter files include hundreds of letters, corresponding with everyone from Frederick H. Stoye and William T. Innes to Mayors Fiorello LaGuardia and William O'Dwyer. She wrote to the Illinois and Maryland legislatures regarding bird protection bills and to the New York legislature regarding dog-licensing laws.

In 1907 she made a formal complaint to the Public Service Commission for the First District of the State of New York to secure enforcement of the ordinance against smoking on the Brooklyn Heights Railroad Company. Although an order of the Public Service Commission permitted smoking during the summer months on the four rear seats of the so-called open and convertible cars of the Line, Mellen claimed that a

city ordinance rendered smoking in the defendant's cars unlawful, and that such smoking was injurious to her health. However, the judge ruled that the claim of injury to health was at most conjectural and speculative. He also noted that "any of the offenses complained of must from the very nature thereof be committed in the immediate presence of the plaintiffs" and Mellen was not actually seated in the smoking sections. Ida, therefore, lost the case. She most probably would smile now if she could see how anti-smoking laws are enforced 100 years later!

On July 16, 1914 a letter appeared in the NEW YORK TIMES signed "Observant," that attacked cats in no uncertain terms. The headline was "Why Waste Sympathy and Care on These Destroyers of Birds?"

"If the correspondent who filled up a half column of THE TIMES of Wednesday seeking a home for a cat would take my advice, he would give it a good bath in a pail of water head down, and then deposit the remains two feet under ground. Wasting sympathy on a cat is to me the most ridiculous exhibition of misplaced sentiment that the maiden ladies are ever guilty of. Few others indulge it. There are plenty of children who need the care and thought that cats do not appreciate, and repay by bringing germs into the house, and making hideous noises at night, which, coming from a small boy, would rouse the neighborhood.

"And as a destroyer of birds, a recent report of the Audubon Society puts them as the second most destructive cause, each cat being credited with an average of fifty a year. If into a large group of birds, we could see a cat spring and kill fifty of them, how long would it be before its death warrant would be signed, or who would have the nerve to protest?"

"Cats should be thrown into the Styx by Charon on his evening trips, and their unearthly wailings from the receding boat would sound like welcoming echoes to the departed spirits from the other shore. A license for a limited number might be granted at \$50 per head, half of the amount to go into a fund for the extinction of the remainder. But to pass laws and create public sentiment to protect the song birds, while encouraging



**Ida May Mellen, circa 1940, just after her second cat book, "The Science and Mystery of the Cat" was published.**

the family pet to exterminate them unrestricted, raises the question at once, Which of the two classes is most worthy of preservation? While the ladies have been the greatest champions of the birds, and leaders in the movement for protective laws, they sometimes let their feelings get the better of their Judgment, and it requires man's clear-cut power of decision to settle the question which the ladies are still debating. Get rid of the cats!"

Even though Ida's following reply appeared in the TIMES the very next day, she was a bit late since the afternoon edition of the paper, as it might be expected, was inundated with a wave of indignant letters from cat-lovers. However, she did express her appreciation to the TIMES and did not bandy words about when it came to characterizing "Observant" nor was she averse to signing the letter with her true name:

"It has been splendid of you to give space to the question of cats – those most maligned and abused of all the creatures dependent upon man for sustenance. It is such ignorant opinions as those entertained by

"Observant" that cause the cruelty and neglect and suffering among these little creatures, about which normal, human-hearted people ever complain."

At Mellen's instigation, in July of 1926 the New York Aquarium tried stocking the Bowling Green fountain pool with goldfish. The attempt was a failure, however, due to the local boys who netted them out, resulting in the demise of the fish. Ida wrote a letter to the TIMES under the title, "Attempt to Stock Pool Prevented by 'Our Future Criminals,'" explaining why there would be no more fish in Bowling Green:

"A boy's attitude toward the animal world is considered a good gauge of his future status as a citizen. If he is kind to animals, he will be kind to people; and vice versa. Those who are interested in the crime situation in this city would, therefore, do well to investigate the type of mind of the boys at the Battery.

"At the north end of Bowling Green is an artificial pool with a fountain. In years gone by the Aquarium often placed goldfish in this pool in spring or summer. They afforded pleasure to the passer-by and when we returned them to the building in the fall of the year we also took out many young ones, the fish having spawned. It was, therefore, a profitable action for both the public and the Aquarium.

"Yesterday we attempted to do this same thing. We selected fifteen of the finest specimens of straight-tailed goldfish we had, including females ready for spawning, and placed them in the pool. Within an hour a young woman phoned from one of the near-by office buildings, asking if we had put goldfish into the pool and saying that they looked beautiful but that boys were destroying them.

"Our men found that the boys were stoning the fish, beating them over the heads with clubs and tossing them into the air and onto the grass. What could be recovered were immediately returned to the Aquarium tanks. Many thousands of persons must be deprived of the pleasure of watching these beautiful creatures in the pool in Bowling Green for the reason that our future criminals will not allow it."

After this letter appeared one correspondent to the TIMES condemned all youngsters as future criminals. Mellen sent another letter to the TIMES published under the title, “Boys and Goldfish; Doubt Expressed if Normal Youngsters Would Kill Wantonly,” clarifying her own position:

“It may interest you to know that of the various letters sent me relative to the destruction of goldfish placed by the New York Aquarium in the Bowling Green fountain pool, only one agrees with you that a normal boy would commit such an act of depredation and deliberately kill animals placed in a public park for exhibition.”

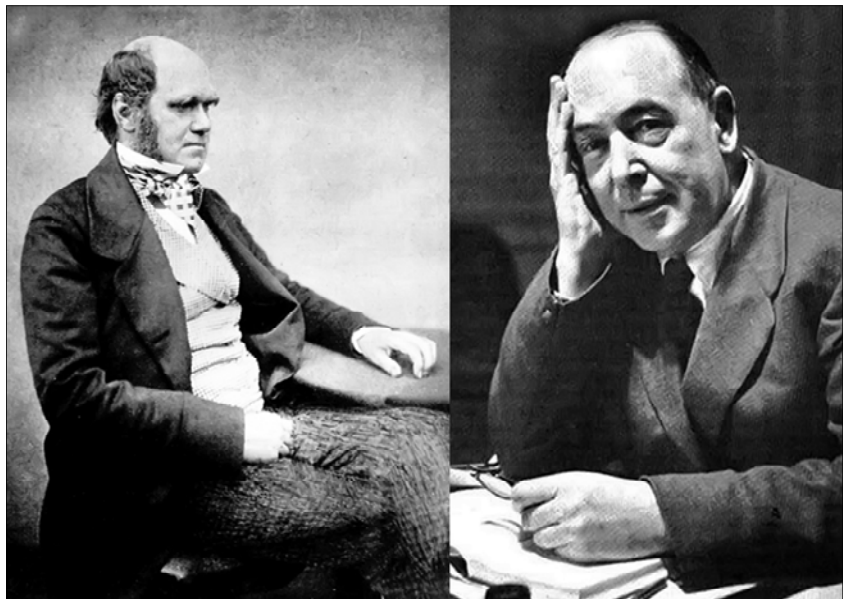
A famous man of the day who Mellen took issue with was C. S. Lewis, the Irish writer and scholar whose works are diverse and include medieval literature, Christian apologetics, literary criticism, radio broadcasts, essays on Christianity, and fiction relating to the fight between good and evil. Lewis is the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, made even more well-known by the recent motion pictures of the same name. Like Mellen, Lewis was an anti-vivisectionist but somewhat more extreme in his views. However, on one occasion he wrote:

“But of course the vast majority of vivisectors have no such theological background. They are most of them naturalistic and Darwinian. Now here, surely, we come up against a very alarming fact. The very same people who will most contemptuously brush aside any consideration of animal suffering if it stands in the way of ‘research’ will also, on another context, most vehemently deny that there is any radical difference between man and the other animals.”

With this statement Lewis in effect had painted Charles Darwin with the vivisectionist’s brush. Mellen took issue with Lewis and defended Darwin vigorously. That Darwin actually took a very balanced

approach to vivisection as it related to cruelty to animals is shown by the following portions of a letter sent by Darwin to the LONDON TIMES in 1881:

“I have all my life been a strong advocate for humanity to animals, and have done what I could in my writings to enforce this duty. Several years ago, when the agitation against physiologists commenced in England, it was asserted that inhumanity was here practised and useless suffering caused to animals; and I was led to think that it might be advisable to have an Act of Parliament on the subject. I then took an active part in trying to get a Bill passed, such as would have removed all just cause of complaint, and at the same time have left physiologists free to pursue their researches – a Bill very different from the Act which has since been passed. It is right to add that the investigation of the matter by a Royal Commission proved that the accusations made against our English physiologists were false. From all that I have heard, however, I fear that in some parts of Europe little regard is paid to the sufferings of animals, and if this be the case I should be glad to hear of legislation against inhumanity in any such country. On the other hand, I know that physiology cannot possibly progress except by means of



**LEFT: C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), author of the *Narnia* stories. RIGHT: Charles Darwin (1809-1882), author of *The Origin of Species*. Mellen defended Darwin against Lewis’s charge that Darwin was a vivisectionist.**

experiments on living animals, and I feel the deepest conviction that he who retards the progress of physiology commits a crime against mankind. Any one who remembers, as I can, the state of this science half a century ago must admit that it has made immense progress, and it is now progressing at an ever-increasing rate.”

It should be noted, however, that to Lewis’s credit he was referring more to the “fanatical and twisted attitudes” of the defenders of the *Origin of Species* than to Darwin himself.

In *The Science and Mystery of the Cat* Mellen also had a few words to say about another celebrity opposed to vivisection:

“The omission of Mark Twain from this list will be noticed by all who have read other lists of outstanding cat lovers. Mark Twain had a kindly heart and he penned a vehement protest against vivisection, for which all animal lovers must feel eternally grateful, but there is nothing in his writings or personal associations with domestic felines which warrants his inclusion in a list of cat lovers. We all



**Ida Mellen gave credit to Mark Twain for his stance on vivisection. After Twain’s cat, “Bambino,” shown here, had gotten lost, Twain specified as part of its description in the newspaper item advertising for its return, “not easy to find in ordinary light.”**

have a blind spot in the eye and a stupid spot in the brain, and Mark Twain’s stupid spot appears to have been cats.”

With regard to the last sentence, perhaps Mellen took exception to certain references to cats in Twain’s stories such as Huckleberry Finn using a dead cat to get rid of warts. In actuality, Twain loved animals, especially cats. When he was a young boy living in Hannibal, Missouri, his family shared their home with nineteen cats at one time and as an adult he always had a couple of pet cats living with him. Possibly Mellen failed to appreciate that when Twain wrote about cats – or anything else, for that matter – the reader more often than not was about to have his or her leg pulled; e.g., “Never try to teach a cat to sing. It wastes your time, and it annoys the cat.”

Twain couldn’t resist the temptation even when matters were serious, as witness the final remark in the following ad he placed in the NEW YORK AMERICAN in 1905 after his cat, “Bambino,” went missing for a day and a half:

“A CAT LOST – FIVE DOLLARS REWARD for his restoration to Mark Twain, No. 21 Fifth Avenue. Large and intensely black; thick, velvety fur; has a faint fringe of white hair across his chest; not easy to find in ordinary light.”

Postscript: Twain’s secretary, Isabel V. Lyon, found Bambino on nearby University Place and brought him home safe and sound.

## THE INVENTOR

In 1938 Mellen approached the Oneida Community, Ltd, a silver manufacturer, with a proposal to have them produce and market a small serving item she invented called a “nut shovel” (see the accompanying figure). She had come up with the idea as a means to discourage the “disgusting,” as she put it, habit of hostesses serving nuts with the expectation of having their guests dip their bare fingers into the bowls. Oneida courteously turned Mellen down, sending her a sample of a “dangerously competitive” item used for bon-bons or



salted nuts. She looked further into the idea of patenting it and also contacted a number of other silver companies, but with no luck.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Mellen was an accomplished photographer and one feature of her *A Practical Cat Book* was its section on photographing the cat. It contained detailed descriptions of techniques and equipment, including a discussion of posing, backgrounds, natural lighting and flash, supplementary lenses for close-ups, and f-stops. The book also included many pictures taken by her of people, catteries and cats. The following are some excerpts from the book:

“Cat pictures should be taken close to the subject, else the image will be too small. If the camera does not focus closer than six feet it is best to obtain a supplementary lens which permits working at arm’s length, and thereby gives a nice large image. It is called a portrait attachment and is inexpensive. Especial care should be taken with the focusing at these short distances, and split second exposures are practically imperative. It is not much use trying for a time exposure unless the cat is asleep.

“Pictures taken indoors by artificial light generally prove more satisfactory when the cat is the subject for three reasons: (1) We are better able to control the cat. (2) We are able to control the light. (3) We may set up a contrasting back ground for the picture such as a white sheet for a dark cat.

“Artificial light for indoor photography may be produced by the use of photographic floodlight and flashlight bulbs in electric light sockets or floor lamps. The flash bulb will catch our cat with any camera that may be set for “time.” With standard (No. 1) floodlight bulbs, if a portrait camera is used it should have an f6.3 lens or faster for a snapshot. If the lens is slower than f6.3, a snap-shot picture requires floodlight bulbs of higher intensity (No. 2).”

Mellen also knew how to photograph fishes, having learned from Elwin R. Sanborn who took almost all of the photographs at the New York Aquarium

during Mellen’s tenure there. Robert J. Lanier, who was a tank man at the Aquarium, also learned fish photography from Sanborn and later a number of Lanier’s photographs were included in the Mellen/Lanier book, “1001 Questions Answered About Your Aquarium.”

When the Bronx Zoo was opened in 1889, the Director, William T. Hornaday, decreed that “as is customary in zoological gardens throughout the world, no photographing is permitted and permits can not be purchased.” This immediately raised a storm of protest in letters to the Director and to the newspapers. Hornaday, however, remained adamant and the prohibition lasted for forty years.

Sanborn had been placed on the payroll in 1899 as a clerk and gatekeeper and was thirty-two years old when he became the New York Zoological Society’s photographer in 1901. He learned photography by doing it and when he retired there were 14,216



**Ida Mellen’s “Nut Shovel” on the left and Oneida’s “dangerously competitive” item on the right. Mellen thought that the habit of hostesses serving nuts with the expectation of having their guests dip their bare fingers into the bowls was “disgusting.”**

negatives in the Society's collection, all of high quality. Although the ban on photography did not apply to the Aquarium, it was natural for Sanborn to take almost all of the Aquarium's official photographs and so there is little of Mellen's work to show for her years there. However, I have included a photograph here taken by Mellen circa 1926 showing a brown shark being hoisted from the Aquarium's well-boat into a carrying can. The picture originally appeared in 1927 in her "The Young Folks' Book of Fishes"; it also appeared un-credited in Townsend's 1928 book, "The Public Aquarium."

### RELIGION, HUMANISM AND POLITICS

In one of her journals Mellen compared the arguments for Christianity to those for Atheism. She



**"COLLECTING." A photograph by Ida May Mellen.**

came to the conclusion that neither side could be proven and so elected a compromise – Pantheism, i.e., "God is all, all is God." By way of explanation, more detailed definitions of Pantheism tend to emphasize the idea that natural law, existence, and the Universe (the sum total of all that is, was and shall be) is represented in the theological principle of an abstract "god" rather than a personal, creative deity or deities of any kind. This is the key feature which distinguishes pantheism from most of the world's religions and it reflects Mellen's theological beliefs as well.

This pantheistic view of God was apparent in a letter she wrote in 1905 to the NEW YORK TIMES regarding a report of the annual gathering of the Baptist Social Union in which one of the speakers, Dr. Lyman Abbott, was laughed at for his espousal of a particular church doctrine. The report stated that the Rev. Robert McDonald was loudly applauded when he declared that "Dr. MacArthur has been teaching for years what Dr. Abbott has just found out. Dr. Abbott is fully fifty years behind the age."

Mellen took no sides in the argument but stated: "It is not our desire, being an entirely neutral party, either to defend Dr. Abbott or to denounce Dr. McDonald; we are only too grateful for the liberty of a land which permits every man to air his beliefs to his heart's desire. We would like to suggest, however, that when a man contemplates denouncing another man's doctrine as 'fifty years behind the age,' that man should first examine whether he himself might not be accused of living in a 'glass house.' It is not so long ago that Dr. Robert McDonald announced from his pulpit that the existence of hell is undeniable. Now, if the doctrine representing a loving Father as eternally enjoying the spectacle of His children writhing in horrible torments is not fifty years behind the age, then all we've got to say is, it ought to be."

Clearly she voiced her opinions and defended her views with vigor, but that she was an assertive but fair-minded woman is also in evidence. In any event, the Rev. Robert McDonald must have squirmed and fumed being taken down by a 28 year old woman in this Edwardian period!

One reader of the TIMES, writing under the nom de plume of “Veritas,” took issue with Mellen’s view of the concept of hell. Mellen replied:

“We do not wish to dispute with ‘Veritas’ his opinion in the TIMES of the 14th inst. of the right of God to punish, and the assumption of some sort of future penalty based upon the fact that men, irrespective of belief or unbelief, recognize the moral justice of punishment ‘now and here on earth’ for wrong-doing.

“In justification, however, of our criticism that the doctrine of hell is away behind the higher thought of to-day, we beg to say that intellectual and scientific progression of the present do find objection to ‘the reasonableness of the orthodox Christian doctrine of future eternal punishment’ because the greatest thinkers of all nations have demonstrated that the more closely men study the universal Bible of Nature the more clearly do they realize that ideals of a great and good God have ceased to be in unison with the conception of a divine Being whose ways and means are inferior to those of humankind.

“It requires very little reasoning to know that no human father, if sane, would inflict upon his child,

however abhorrent the nature or criminal the acts of that child, any such punishment as the tortures which orthodox Christians in their doctrine of hell depict their God as inflicting upon His children. If we cannot have a God nobler and better than ourselves, at least let us have one as good as we are.”

Although Mellen was interested in humanism, she was not a humanist per se. From 1938 through 1947 Mellen attended lectures sponsored by the First Humanist Society of New York City, founded in 1929 by Charles Francis Potter (1885–1962) and which included on its advisory board, among others, John Dewey, Will Durant, Helen Keller, and Herbert Bayard Swope. To quote Potter:

“Humanism is not only belief in the possibility of the slow and steady self-improvement of the would-be-human race, individually and socially, without any assistance from alleged celestial super-persons, but it is also the intelligent implementation of that belief by co-operation with groups and agencies working toward that end.”

Mellen, however, had this to say about the definition: “Dr. Potter’s definition of Humanism for Webster’s



**A brown shark (*Carcharhinus milberti*) captured in New York waters, photographed by Ida Mellen as it is being hoisted from the New York Aquarium’s well-boat into a carrying can. Mellen was an accomplished photographer but took few pictures at the Aquarium since that job was usually performed by the Official Zoo Photographer, Elwin R. Sanborn.**

permanently prevents me from becoming a Humanist. Self-perfectibility has been superseded by self-improvement, which is more reasonable, since perfection, at least in the Occident, is out of the question. Also, I consider character more important than personality and draw a sharp line of demarcation between the two. This bars me as well from embracing Humanism.”

She also commented on the definition of humanism given by Dr. Carleton Steven Coon (1904-1981), one of the last of a generation of anthropological generalists:

“Dr. Coon’s definition of Humanism is wholly wrong in saying that ‘Every scientist has to be a



Mellen was an excellent photographer. She wrote a section on photographing the cat in her *A Practical Cat Book*, and both of her cat books are well-supplied with pictures she had taken of cats and people. This image taken by her appeared in *The Science and Mystery of the Cat* in a section titled, “Cat and Child, and Cat and Old Men,” in which she noted that “men frequently turn to the soothing feline for comfort in their declining years.”

Humanist as well, if he wants anyone to read and understand his stuff.’ Apparently he forgets there are other sciences in the world than anthropology. I have been writing books in the field of popular science for thirty years, and it would be ridiculous to suggest that I would need to become a Humanist in order to be understood.”

In 1957 Mellen wrote: “I list myself in Who’s Who as a rationalist and feel that liberals who commonly avoid mentioning their convictions in such a record do serious wrong to liberalism.”

It should be pointed out, however, that within liberalism there are two major streams of thought – classical liberalism and social liberalism, the latter being generally what is thought of when the term is mentioned today. They compete over the use of the term and have been known to clash on many issues as they differ on their understanding of what constitutes freedom. Classical liberals, among whom Mellen counted herself, believe that the only real freedom is freedom from coercion. As a result, they see state intervention in the economy as a coercive power that restricts the economic freedom of individuals and therefore oppose the welfare state.

Mellen did not write about politics, and the closest she came to commenting on this subject is when she bemoaned the fact that authors fared poorly under the Social Security Act of 1935.

#### MELLEN AND EUGENICS

Many individuals submitted to the ERO unsolicited, informal assessments of the dysgenic in their communities, as is shown by a letter written in 1912 from Mellen to Harry Laughlin:

“I have been trying for some months to find out just why the child of my charwoman is feebleminded, aside from the obvious fact that the woman herself is ‘cracked’ on religion. By getting one fact at a time I have finally drawn out about all that seems possible, and herewith enclose you the account and chart. I do not know that it is worth anything, but send it in any event, for, in a general way, it shows a relationship

between religious insanity, violent temper etc., and feeble-mindedness...”

After Mellen had completed her summer training in 1912 she, like many of her ERO co-workers, made special efforts to keep in touch. Mellen, for example, told friends through the EUGENICAL NEWS in 1917 while working at the New York Aquarium that “...eugenically, the fishes (excepting those artificially bred for centuries) offer little material... but some of them are so vicious that it makes me wonder if... in this case bad temper and insanity are one, but, if so, then a whole species is insane.” In 1918 she filed genealogical memoranda with the ERO tracing literary ability in a branch of her family.

In 1919 Mellen listed her interests consecutively as Biology, Philology and Heredity (Samuel E. Cassino, *The Naturalists' Directory*). From an analysis of her writings and correspondence there is no doubt that Mellen's interest lay in genetics and heredity, and certainly not in negative eugenics. She wrote, for example, the following articles in this area: “Three Generations of Deaf White Cats” (JOURNAL OF HEREDITY, November 1919); “The Origin of the Mexican Hairless Cat” (JOURNAL OF HEREDITY, October 1939); “Ten Pairs of Twins” (JOURNAL OF HEREDITY, September 1938); and “A Contrast to Kaspar Hauser” (AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY, April 1926).

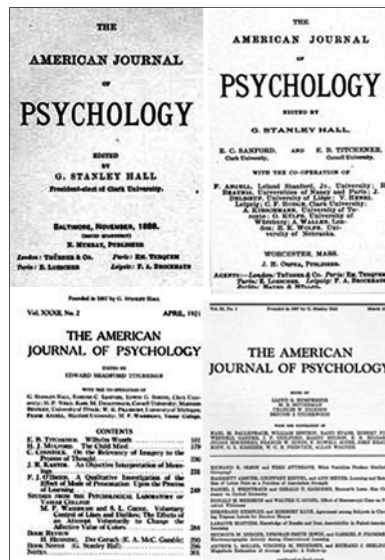
The first and second articles were concerned with feline genetics, and the twins article was an elaboration of seven generations of the Mellen family tree based on data collected during her genealogical research, similar to the genealogical memoranda filed in 1918 with the ERO tracing her family literary ability. In the twins article she noted, for example, that four pairs were identical twins, only one twin sired twins, in no case did more than one pair of twins occur in the same family, and that all twins descended from male lines and none from the female lines.

The subject of the last article was a mysterious foundling in 19th century Germany with suspected ties to the royal House of Baden. On May 26, 1828 he appeared in the streets of Nuremberg, Germany, walking as if drunk and wearing peasant clothing. He would barely talk and refused all food except bread and water. He was taken to a police station where he would write the name, “Kaspar Hauser.”

At first it was assumed that he had been raised like a half-wild human in forests, but he had several mysterious papers in his possession later leading to rumors that he was of princely parentage, possibly of Baden origin. As his vocabulary grew with age, disturbing details of his past life emerged. According to his story he had, for as long as he could think back, spent his life totally alone in a very small darkened cell with only a straw bed to sleep on and a horse carved out of wood for a toy. He claimed that he had been given nothing but bread and water.

He was placed in the care of a university professor who had a reputation for his work in education. He studied Kaspar and kept a diary of the time he spent with him. In 1829 there was an unsuccessful attempt on Hauser's life, but in 1833 he succumbed to another as he was walking in a nearby park. In 2002, samples for DNA analysis were obtained from the boy's hat, trousers and hair curls. The results showed a 95% match to the DNA of Astrid von Medinger who was a descendant of Stephanie de Beauharnais,

**Mellen's articles in the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY and the JOURNAL OF HEREDITY concerned genetics and heredity, not negative eugenics.**



the wife of Karl Ludwig Friedrich Großherzog von Baden. In short, the DNA evidence would seem to show that Kaspar Hauser was indeed a descendant of the House of Baden.

Mellen's paper, "A Contrast to Kaspar Hauser," concerned a young girl whose development was more fortunate than that of Hauser's, hence the word "contrast" in the title. The following is the complete text:

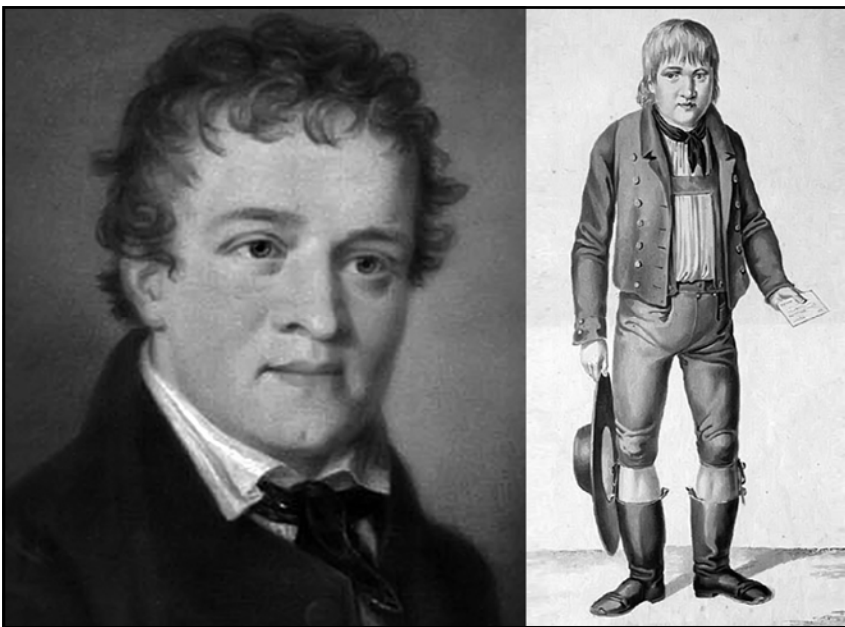
"Kasper Hauser, the abducted Prince of Baden, was, as accurately as can be judged from existing evidence, probably a royal personage. Whether he was born with good intelligence it is impossible to state, but he was confined in a dungeon until sixteen years of age, and on his release and appearance at the gates of Nuremberg it was found impossible to educate him or to make him useful to himself or to others. The case here presented is that of a modern girl, known to be defective from birth, and wholly neglected as to education after the age of seven or eight, who yet at nineteen years of age proved capable of considerable mental improvement.

"At seven years of age, having previously gone to school and been reported by her teacher as

mentally deficient, she was sent to a state institution for the feeble-minded, which was at the time under very bad management. She experienced for twelve years nothing but drudgery and severe punishments, no attempt being made to educate her. At nineteen, the circumstances of her family improved and she was taken home. An intelligence test given her shortly after showed a mental age of nine years, but as she was unfamiliar with coins and could neither read nor write, the tests had to be modified to suit her case. She was incapable of concentration, and so easily fatigued that she could not finish the test at one sitting.

"A few weeks after being brought home she had learned to handle coins and could run errands for her mother, bringing back the correct change. Employment was procured for her at sorting salt bags, with a wage of nine, later thirteen dollars. This position she kept for nearly five years, until the firm went out of business; she then procured employment at putting pepper in boxes, for one of the chain grocery concerns, being paid thirteen dollars a week. Later she was advanced to the work of attaching labels, and finally to the packing of candy. She has therefore never been a burden to her people. She is neat and honest, greatly attached to her family, and has improved so markedly that though at first decidedly 'institutionalized,' she now in appearance passes for normal.

"She has gone to a night school for several winters, where she has learned a little reading and writing and simple figuring, although the school had of course no individual instruction. She is now twenty-five, and an intelligence test, given without modification in 1924, showed her to have a mental age of ten. She has learned to dance and to play simple games, such as Lotto; she can sew, crochet, and embroider, writes a legible hand and copies well from a copy book. It is not improbable that training by experts between the years of nineteen and twenty-one might have resulted in a gain of one or two more



Kasper Hauser (1812-1833)

mental years. As it is, her gain at so late an age renders her case interesting.”

Although in old age Mellen was tainted by the excesses in the latter stages of eugenics, she was a caring person who had a great concern for people and for animals, as attested to by her membership in the following: the International Humane Education Foundation, New England Anti-Vivisection Society, American Humanist Association, Big Sister League, Inc., World Fellowship, Inc., World Center for Women’s Studies and World Center for Women’s Archives, Inc. In her daily life Mellen practiced what she preached. From 1918 to 1920, for example, she “adopted” a French war orphan, Louise Tuilly.

### **A TARNISHED “NEPHEW”?**

Eugenics’ scientific reputation started to tumble in the 1930s, a time when eugenic rhetoric began to be incorporated into the racial policies of Nazi Germany and both the public and the scientific communities subsequently associated eugenics with Nazi abuses such as enforced racial hygiene, human experimentation, and the extermination of undesired population groups.

One so tainted was Leon F. Whitney (1894-1973), well-known in the aquarium world from his books, “All About Guppies” (1952; an updated version was published in 1955 with Paul Hahnel as co-author) and “The Complete Guide to Tropical Fishes” (with Earl Schneider, 1957). A veterinarian, he also wrote popular books on other pets such as cats and pigeons, and he was a noted authority when it came to dogs. I allude to Whitney here because – and this will come as a revelation to most aquarists – addressed her in correspondence as either “Aunt” or “Auntie.” Whether this was a true blood relationship or whether Mellen was just a close friend of the family is not known. However, Mellen and Whitley’s mother, Geneva Whitney, both lived in Brooklyn and had relatives in Massachusetts. It is probable that they were close friends and Mellen - not uncommon for the times - would be called “Aunt” by Geneva Whitney’s sons.



**Madison Grant (1865-1937), Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Zoological Society of New York. Eugenists like Grant and Charles B. Davenport equated class with race, conducting “research” to prove that southern and eastern Europeans, being genetically inferior to northwestern Europeans, were incapable of upward mobility. Jews, Italians, Irish, and other groups who had previously been considered white — albeit lower class — suddenly found themselves designated as races separate from the “Nordic” upper class.**

Whitney was deeply interested in eugenics and was a member of the American Eugenics Society (AES), holding various posts over time including that of Executive Secretary and Director. The Society was founded in 1926 in New York City by Harry H. Laughlin, Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn, the last two noted previously as being associated with the New York Zoological Society, and was visualized as being the propaganda or popular education arm spearheading the eugenics movement. As mentioned previously, Charles B.

Davenport was listed as being a member of the Aquarium Committee of the New York Zoological Society from 1916 to 1918. Davenport maintained connections with institutions and publications in Nazi Germany before and during World War II, and he most likely was placed on the committee by Grant or Osborn, who were of like minds.

By 1931, due to new scientific discoveries regarding genetics, conflicting opinions within the AES leadership regarding sterilization, birth control and race spawned conflict within the society. Whitney, however, remained concerned about the mentally deficient in the population. In a confidential letter to U.S. Representative Albert Johnson dated January 26, 1931, Whitney wrote:

“...obviously we are breeding from the bottom as a nation. All the figures show that the stupid people are having large families while the intelligent people are cutting down the size of their families...”



**Florence Brown Sherbon and Mary T. Watts, founders of the “Fitter Families Contest,” with Leon F. Whitney at the Kansas State Free Fair, 1926.**

Embarrassment to the society and some of its scientific members occurred in 1934 when Whitney, its acting executive director at the time, published a pamphlet supporting the Nazi sterilization program. To quote Whitney: “We cannot but admire the foresight of the (German) plan (of sterilizing 4,000,000 people) and realize [that] by this action Germany is going to make itself a stronger nation.” The German program mentioned began in January 1934, but it should be noted that in the U.S. the State of Indiana had passed a forced sterilization law for mental defectives in 1907. Before the German program began, at least seventeen U.S. states had similar laws. Before 1930 there were 200-600 forced sterilizations per year in the U.S., but in the 1930s the rate jumped to 2,000-4,000 per year.

However, assuming a more moderate tone than those of Davenport and Grant, Whitney had suggested a method of “voluntary” sterilization, one that would avoid the negative connotations then being associated in some American minds with the German program: “Give them the necessary information and instruction and let them decide for themselves whether to have a few children or many... Here is a nice shiny automobile; and here is a baby... Which will the morons choose?”

Nonetheless, in 1934, the same year that the German mass sterilizations began, one of Hitler’s staff members wrote to Whitney and asked in the name of the Führer for a copy of Whitney’s recently published book, *The Case for Sterilization*. Whitney complied immediately, and shortly thereafter received a personal letter of thanks from Adolf Hitler.

Madison Grant, who has been previously mentioned, created what we might call the “racialist moment” in American history. He advocated that America abandon a largely open-door immigration policy and favored a eugenics program that would promote the Nordic race, discourage the expansion of the colored races in the white world and condemn miscegenation. Because Whitney thought Grant might be interested in Hitler’s letter he showed it to him during their next meeting. Grant only smiled,



reached for a folder on his desk, and gave Whitney his own letter from Hitler to read. In this, Hitler thanked Grant for writing *The Passing of the Great Race* and said that “the book was his Bible.” In his unpublished autobiography written in 1971, Whitney concluded that, following Hitler’s actions, one could believe it. Whitney still defended his stance, however, maintaining that “no ruler ever before had had the courage or the knowledge to put sterilization to work.” He allowed, however, that in the 1930s he had not been aware of “what a vile human being” Hitler was.

However, the documented exchanges between Mellen and Whitney dealt with his writings on fish, not with eugenics. While Whitney was beginning the process of writing *The Complete Book of Home Pet Care* (published by Doubleday in 1950), he approached his Aunt and offered her a “business” transaction, to wit that she would share in the profits of the book if Mellen would edit the fish section for scientific accuracy prior to him submitting it to a publisher. The following is the letter, dated September 5, 1948:

“Dear Aunt Ida:

“Here’s a strictly business proposition:

“How much will you charge me to read my fish section of the book I’m writing (about diseases and feeding of all animal species) and make the necessary corrections and offer suggestions for improvements. It may be about 30 to 40 typewritten pages.

“What’s the best book on Fish Diseases? Not Innes. I want to read the sources where he got his information. This section is almost finished and now I want to check and be sure I have everything useful in it.

“I’m a guppy enthusiast. No more of any other kinds! Who raises really outstanding guppies? There’s a man in Hartford raising some but they won’t tell me his name. He raises fine veiltails. I have a lot now. Albinos which I have learned how to breed, goldens, veil tails, crosses and I want more giants and some reds. To talk with dealers one would think nobody did anything but raise them helter skelter. I’m sure there must be specialists.

“We nearly lost mother last week. She had an attack of nephritis and heart but they only said it was heart. She’s still a mighty sick kid. Could hear the angel Gabriel tooting and St. Peter squealing the rusty hinges on Heaven’s Gate, but some power yanked her out. She really believes in it! I say let her! I’m glad I don’t.

“I think one of the next books I’m going to dash off is “A Boy’s Idea of God.” The boy was me. I mean I was the boy and I think the idea I had and still have of God is the soundest, most worthwhile guide for young folks that I can imagine. He is LIFE. I came by the idea by combining biology and Religion and my reasoning was interesting as I found from my diary. I guess I’m really an atheist but I feel a deep respect for life. It makes us all kin.

“How have you been? Ain’t ye ever coming to see us again? We’d love to have you.

“Affectionately, Leon



**After Mellen left the New York Public Aquarium in 1919 she remained active in broadcasting and appeared in 1938 on WMAQ’s Town Hall, hosted by Fred Allen shown above. She tried getting a position as a radio announcer but was not successful.**



IDA MAY MELLEN, 1930.

“P.S. If you ever get the chance drop mother a line.  
 Geneva F. Whitney  
 Westminister, Mass.”

The letter not only shows a more humane side of Leon Whitney, but it describes his feelings about religion, a point of view largely shared by his aunt.

### AN UNHAPPY LIFE EXAMINED

That Mellen was dissatisfied with life in general is clear from the diaries she kept during her adult years labeled *Original Thoughts*. She often considered suicide and one entry in 1919 read:

“I divide existence into approximately 3 states of experience:

larger tragedies	25% of the time
lesser tragedies	66% of the time
happiness	9% of the time”

An early cause of melancholy anguish was in regard

to finding a career in which she could be happy. Between 1893 and 1916 she had trained for a variety of positions and was disillusioned that she could ever succeed. In 1914 she wrote the following letter to the NEW YORK TIMES. It raises an interesting point that has relevance even today, and it is expounded in a way that once again shows Ida Mellen’s way with words.

#### “Mute Miltons Should Be Freed from Uncongenial Tasks.

“One reads of some effort to make humanity well, to provide it food, books, healthier homes, better clothing, luxuries as well as necessities, etc., which provisions are all very good, indeed excellent, as far as they go; but where is there any effort to produce real happiness? Do we ever hear of a single attempt (except by corporations who can pay a big price to character readers for it, and in the matter of their own employees and their own employment only) toward producing the only possible genuine happiness—the placing of the individual in the environment really suited to his particular needs; the giving him that work in life for which he is manifestly fitted? There is absolutely no such movement for the public weal anywhere—nor is there one for which a more crying need exists.

“Society has done nothing to alleviate the great universal misery caused by the misplacement of the individual in the work of life, and unless by some unexpected stroke of fortune (more rare even than unexpected) or by some Herculean effort he can get out of the rut and get himself properly placed. The born artist, for all society will do, may grind out his life at the forge or her life at the sewing machine; the born musician may keep books, the born philosopher may mold buttons, the born scientist may eke out an existence at typewriting, the born teacher may fashion millinery, the born tailor may work at plastering, the born carpenter may be a grocer’s clerk.

“But if there were institutions for the ascertainment of the work in life for which each individual is manifestly suited, and for the procurement of that work if he is already fitted for it, or for meeting the expenses of fitting him for it if need be—the returns in universal health and happiness would be beyond the possibility of computation. And we never can have either happiness or perfect health until every man and woman of those who are actively engaged in the world’s work shall be found in that place for which each is best fitted by nature.”

That Ida Mellen never married is not surprising, given the appalling history of her father. Andrew Mellen’s various arrests, convictions and incarcerations over the period of her marriage must have affected Ida’s mother grievously, not to mention the publicity given to his last trial in New York City. Although Ida was only three years old when her father died in the New York State Asylum for Insane Criminals, her mother undoubtedly made her aware of her father’s history as she was growing up. Her oldest brother, Frank, who was 16 years of age at the time of his father’s death and knew all the details, would also have discussed this with her as the two were close. Frank Mellen may even have suffered the most at the time since his acquaintances, being young people of 15 or 16, most likely would have taunted him mercilessly. His mother would have been treated with greater consideration by her friends, at least in her presence. Frank, however, did not have that advantage. In Ida Mellen’s personal papers, very little is mentioned about her father except for birth and death dates and some short biographical information about his first marriage. On all else, Ida is quiet.

Her poor treatment by the male oligarchy that ran the New York Aquarium and the New York Zoological Society also influenced her views on men. When the Provost at Columbia University told her one thing when inquiring about the requirements for an honorary degree and another when replying to a female friend who was recommending Ida for the honor (her first name was Francis so he did not know the gender of with whom he was corresponding), Mellen commented: “So Fackenthal is a good liar, like most men.” In one of her “Original Thoughts” diaries

she noted: “A man treats every woman as he treats his mother – taking everything and giving nothing in return, or gladdening her life with little acts, kindnesses, appreciation and reciprocity.”

Another distasteful experience occurred in 1938 when Gilbert I. Davis wrote an article on marine aquaria for the PENNSYLVANIA FISH CULTURIST that consisted almost entirely of material taken from articles Mellen had written for the PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER and from her books, “Fishes in the Home” and “1001 Questions Answered About Your Aquarium.” Mellen wrote to the editor, J. Louis Troemner, bringing the matter to his attention. Troemner, who was not aware of the plagiarism, was embarrassed and apologized, telling Mellen that he would ask Gilbert to write to her with an explanation and an apology. After a few weeks Mellen wrote Troemner again, informing him that she had not heard from Gilbert. Troemner wrote back that

## **YOUR FISH SICK? SEE IDA MELLEN**



*Midget shark gets mercurochrome treatment for sore eye*

**Mellen became famous in 1928 as the “Fish Doctor,” but in order to supplement her income during the Depression she went into private practice in 1938. By 1940, newspapers all over the country were referring to her as the “Florence Nightingale of the Piscatorial World.”**

*The Daily Times-Bulletin, Van Wert, Ohio, October 8, 1940.*

immediately after receiving her second letter he walked over to Gilbert's rooms to personally ask him to write to her. Gilbert was out so Troemner left a note to that effect. Gilbert, however, never responded to Troemner's second request, either.

Mellen contacted her publisher, Dodd, Mead & Co., to have their attorney write to Gilbert but once again Gilbert ignored the letter. Exasperated, Mellen wrote letters to the editors of a number of pet and aquarium magazines warning them about Gilbert. The editors thanked Mellen, and William T. Innes in particular wrote back to her: "I know Mr. G.I.D., and I must say he is a member of a very select circle. This comprises a small number of people in the world I dislike." Innes went on to say that he thought Davis's work was junk and that he would never have published his material in any case.

This is not to suggest that Mellen was dissatisfied with all men. She certainly got along well with her

editors like Frank Dietrich of ALL-PETS MAGAZINE, William T. Innes of THE AQUARIUM and Charles H. Peters of THE HOME AQUARIUM BULLETIN, all of whom solicited her articles. More importantly, she carried on a healthy correspondence within and was respected and admired by the scientific community, including men like Dr. William Beebe of the New York Zoological Society, Stanley S. Flower, Curator of the London Zoological Gardens, T.H. Gillespie of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and Prof. Harry Borrer Kirk, the leading biologist of New Zealand at the time, to name just a few. Kirk, unlike many others of the time, placed female scientists on an equal level with men. In 1907, for example, the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury in New Zealand organized an expedition to the Auckland and Campbell Islands and when the principle botanist dropped out, Kirk wrote to the Institute requesting the inclusion of a "distinguished lady botanist" but the Institute's Council "could not see its way clear to take a lady."

After she left the New York Aquarium her problems were mainly economic. Shortly after she left, the stock market suffered its dramatic crash of October 27th that ushered in the Great Depression of the Thirties. Jobs were hard to find, although Mellen tried everything, including trying to get a position as a radio announcer (she was still active in broadcasting and appeared in 1938 on WMAQ's Town Hall, hosted by Fred Allen) to applying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. With regard to the FBI, on February 14, 1938 she wrote to J. Edgar Hoover seeking a position. Although Mellen was turned down, Hoover himself replied saying "...the character of the work performed by this Bureau precludes the use of female Special Agents." Once again Mellen fell victim to the glass ceiling – the first female Special Agent was to join the Bureau in 1972 following the death of Hoover – although Hoover did state that her letter would be kept on file in case her services might be of use at some future date.

As might be expected, Mellen applied to other public aquaria, such as the Shedd Aquarium whose Director, Walter H. Chute, would have taken her on in a heartbeat were it not for the fact that due to the Depression there just weren't any positions available.



**Ida May Mellen, author of "Roof Gardening," practiced what she preached.**

Mellen, therefore, had to exist mainly on her writings and book royalties. However, these did not bring in very much money. For the four years between 1941 and 1953 for which I have copies of her income tax returns, her gross income averaged about \$7,900 a year converted to current equivalents. The Federal Government, it should be noted, considers anyone making less than \$9,000 a year to be earning below the poverty income.

On top of all this, in 1932 she developed severe eye problems to the extent that it was feared she might never be able to read again. As a result, during most of the year she had to turn down requests for articles; fortunately, however, she slowly recovered.

In 1935 President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act. However, most women (and minorities) were excluded from the benefits of unemployment insurance and old age pensions since employment definitions reflected typical white male categories and patterns. Women generally only qualified for insurance through their husbands or their children, so the Act benefited her very little, amounting to about \$340 a year converted to current equivalents.

After Townsend retired in 1937, Mellen wrote to Fairfield Osborn (he shortened his full name of Henry Fairfield Osborn, Jr. after the death of his father), then Secretary of the New York Zoological Society, and asked if at least some of the pension paid to Townsend could be transferred to her for the years of service she gave to the Aquarium, much of which was in running it in Townsend's name. Osborn replied that the pension for Townsend was a special appropriation that would require Executive Committee approval. However, not wanting to involve himself in the Townsend-Mellen controversy with which he was quite familiar, having been a member of the Society's Board of Trustees since 1922, he declined to pursue her request further.

As mentioned previously, Mellen had become famous in 1928 as the "Fish Doctor," but in order to supplement her income during the Depression she went into private practice in 1938 and by 1940, newspapers all over the country were referring to her

as the "Florence Nightingale of the Piscatorial World." "It will catch cold if it goes too near the surface of the water and gets in a direct draft from an open window or door."

Not all of the entries in her "Original Thoughts" journals were as dreary as those cited previously. A 1930 entry shows her sense of humor: "People who want to keep 30 tanks of fishes are like those who want to keep 30 cats." And in 1926 she wrote: "To be successful in taking fish photos, one must be a Bonheur for art, a Griselda for patience and a da Vinci for insight and mechanical ingenuity."

I wonder how many people today would recognize the name Bonheur, actually Rosa Bonheur, widely considered to have been the most famous woman painter of the nineteenth century, or Griselda, the heroine of a story by Boccaccio whose husband put her through numerous tests to prove her loyalty, all of which she bore patiently and without complaint. I bring this up to illustrate the level of learning achieved by Mellen who never obtained a university degree.



**Mellen also applied for a position in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Hoover himself answered her letter and promised to keep it on file in case her services might be of use at some future time.**

Indeed, when it comes to erudition Mellen is always full of surprises. Upon reading some of her correspondence with Prof. Harry Borrer Kirk I was introduced to *Peripatus*, a genus of Onychophora or “velvet worms,” said to be a living fossil because it has been unchanged for approximately 570 million years. *Peripatus*, native to scattered places around the world including New Zealand, is a nocturnal carnivore. It feeds by trapping its prey (mostly small insects) in a white, sticky fluid it ejects from two antennae near its head. The fluid hardens on contact with the air and then the prey becomes immobilized. It then chews a hole in its victim’s exoskeleton with its mandibles, injects digestive enzymes, and begins sucking out its prey’s pre-digested innards. One wonders what Ida Mellen was not interested in!

In her personal papers she wrote:

“I am 47 years old and poor-headed for the Poor House as far as I can see. I cannot make a saving wage. I am called a successful woman. What irony! The New York standard of a successful person is ‘one who can make the world pay him his price.’ The best I have been able to do is to get my employers to agree to pay me half of what I am worth, and then repudiate the agreement.

“I am 47. I have the ability to write. I have been called ‘the best educated woman in the U.S.’ I have energy,



**Mellen’s correspondence covered many unusual aspects of biology, including the *Peripatus* shown here.**

ambition, personality and, I am told, charm. Yet I cannot make a saving wage. While others’ incomes have tripled to meet the tripled costs of commodities, mine has barely doubled. My salary has increased by not quite 100% while my rent has increased nearly 300%. Am I stultifying my powers - warping my gifts like a Chinese woman’s foot in a vise?”

This was written in 1924 when her employers were the New York Aquarium. As Muka points out, due to her desire to maintain a job in the sciences, her experience of working at previous positions which paid much lower wages, and her need for financial security, Mellen accepted lesser payment for performing an expansive workload at the Aquarium, ranging from secretarial, stenographic and librarian services to public outreach, veterinarian, and chief aquarist duties. Her salary never rose after 1922 even though she took on more extensive and time consuming roles. Adding insult to injury, hired five years after Mellen, Breder’s starting salary outdistanced Mellen’s by nearly 20 percent, even though he had no prior work experience as an aquarist and had inferior educational credentials.

Mellen’s financial fortunes after she left the Aquarium were disheartening, with no sign of improvement on the horizon. In 1940 she applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship, but did not make the cut. The only thing that brought her any comfort now was the public recognition she received and the respect of those people in the scientific community she esteemed. One important honor she had not achieved during this time, however, was an honorary degree, something that had been awarded to Townsend and to Breder. She initiated inquiries to various institutions – a total of fourteen as the campaign proceeded – as to the requirements and procedures involved. In general, there were two requirements: a documented history of accomplishments showing merit, and letters of recommendation from people of importance. The first was certainly no problem, and Mellen had many friends, both male and female, who supplied the latter.

In an article written by Tara Cuthbert, a Research Assistant at the Brooklyn Public Library (“Little-Known Brooklyn Residents: Dr. Ida Mellen,” BROOKLYNOLOGY, Brooklyn Public Library, June 8,

2010) Mellen is referred to as “Dr.” In a short biography of Mellen written by Kerry Prendergast, Library & Archives Director for the Wildlife Conservation Society, a successor to the New York Zoological Society (“Ida May Mellen,” *WCS Library Archives, Historical Staff Biographies*, January 2012), Prendergast refers to her title in the Cuthbert article but remarks, “There is no clear evidence that Mellen held a doctorate degree.” In this I agree since there are no letters or correspondence in the “Guide to the Ida M. Mellen Papers, Manuscripts & Archives Division, New York Public Library” suggesting that any degree, honorary or otherwise, was ever awarded to Mellen. If she had been awarded an honorary doctorate the paperwork would most certainly be in the Mellen Papers.

However, the title of “Dr.” (without the quotes) in front of Mellen’s name appears frequently in newspapers, including “Fish Surgeon” (THE OLEAN TIMES-HERALD, June 20, 1936), “Cat People” and the ‘Fish Folks’ are Ida Mellen’s Very best Friends” (BROOKLYN EAGLE 1940), “Cat’s Brain Near Human Proportions” (RICHFIELD SPRINGS [N.Y.] MERCURY, May 30, 1940), “Boro ‘Who’s Who’ Women Meet, Plan Annual Reunion” (BROOKLYN EAGLE, December 1943), “Boro Lady Naturalist Finds Pigs ‘Charming Little Creatures’” (BROOKLYN EAGLE, January 24, 1953) and numerous other newspapers I need not cite further, as well as in a magazine article, “An Amiable Child,” CORONET MAGAZINE, pp. 36-37, August, 1958.

As early as 1928, when her fame as a “fish doctor” was at its height, Mellen was referred to in the press as “Doctor,” with the quotes. Perhaps this soubriquet (a name or phrase that describes the character of someone or something) over time was simplified in the newspapers. There is no way of knowing whether Mellen insisted on the title or whether the newspaper reporters themselves awarded the title. It is interesting to note that Mellen did not use the title herself when writing for technical publications.

## FAILING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Unfortunately, as her financial and professional life became more precarious, Mellen’s mental health seems to have also suffered also. Perhaps based upon her own financial struggles and her missed opportunities in sciences due to her need to support herself, Mellen concocted a scheme (“Would Erase Insane to Aid Aged Scholars,” BROOKLYN EAGLE, Nov. 17, 1946) that would help scholars take advantage of their old age to pursue “important work which the years of wage-earning had restricted” and to provide “large pensions” to “senior citizens of high scholastic attainment.” Since the article is interesting and tells us a lot about Mellen’s state of mind during these years, I present it here in its entirety.

### WOULD ERASE INSANE TO AID AGED SCHOLARS

**Pint-sized, brown-eyed, learned Dr. Ida M. Mellen, who wouldn’t hurt a fish, believes that the world would be better off without the hopelessly Insane, the idiots, the incurable criminals who are now existing at public expense in costly institutions. She would use the money saved (by their removal in some painless way) to provide pensions for aging scholars. Large pensions.**



547 East 4th Street, Brooklyn, New York. This was Ida Mellen’s home for many years. The house was owned by a photographer and his wife and they rented out a portion to Mellen.

"They could follow important work which the years of wage-earning had restricted," explains Dr. Mellen, one of the world's best authorities on the ailments of fish, noted as an aquarist, zoologist and biologist and formerly with the New York Aquarium. She has made a life work of the habitats and habits of the be-finned and be-furred creatures, but "being a human being, I'm interested in bipeds too," she remarked, at her home, 547 E. 4th St., where she is currently engaged in writing her autobiography.

She is particularly interested in what she calls "senior citizens," and though only now pushing her idea of pensions for post-mature (another term she likes) scholars, she has been working on various schemes to benefit them since 1925. She has collected quantities of facts and figures on the subject.

#### Likes Scandinavian Plan

"In Denmark and other Scandinavian countries prior to the late war a step had been made toward working from the top down, in the matter of old age pensions, by constituting scholars past 60 as wards of the state, as was done in ancient times."

"These old people are the chief source of wisdom. It is said that only a brain colored by the pigmentation of old age will produce wisdom. It was Henry Ford who said, 'Take all the experience and judgment of men over 60 out of the World, and there would be not be enough left to run it.'"

Dr. Mellen has worked out several plans for providing for scholars in the last few years. Her suggestions, she notes, undeterred, have been invariably ignored.

After playing around with various schemes, including one which utilized a series of prize essays on what to do for the elderly, to be written by the aged, and providing for awards of from \$25,000 to \$1,000, Dr. Mellen has practically fixed on the care-for-the-scholars-instead-of-the-misfits plan. A byproduct of this

plan, as she has outlined it, includes limitation of the world population to 100,000,000 people.

"That would solve the food problem," explains Dr. Mellen. "As is it now, the Malthusian theory seems to be working." [Malthus was an economist who predicted that if people kept on multiplying at the rate they were going, there would be more people, eventually, than could possibly find food. Ed.]

#### Concerned With Scholars

But it is with aging scholars, and the aged in general, that Dr. Mellen's plan is concerned.

"The old should be permitted to realize their dreams," she says. "Some say age is a calamity, others that it is an opportunity. So far I have observed only its calamitous aspects. That is because we have never done anything about conserving our human resources."

"Special, high pensions should be provided for scholars so that they may enjoy the "good emotional adjustment necessary for continued efficiency. Then they can carry out the work they have been planning to do all their lives."

Dr. Mellen is ready with tables showing how the population age has changed since 1800, when people could expect to live to be 16 and not much more, until now, when it's nothing to live to be 66. She is also primed with stories of the accomplishments of the aged: Michelangelo drew up the plans for St. Peter's of Rome at the age of 90, she likes to point out, among other interesting items of senescence.

#### Admirer of Dr. Martin

She is a great admirer of Dr. Lillian J. Martin, former psychology professor of Leland Stanford University, who retired at 65, and then proceeded to found the first child guidance clinic in the country and the first old age center in San Francisco. At 67 she first learned to drive, then drove, back and forth across the country six times, and at 88 learned to speak Spanish and traveled all over South America. She would



**up in a whirl of activity, running a profitable 64-acre farm at the age of 89, with the aid of four 60-year-old helpers.**

**The current system of old age pensions and the social security program do not cover the needs of senior citizens of high scholastic attainment, Dr. Mellen feels. Only the “very special, high pensions” would fill their needs, and they would then be “wards of a proud state” - proud to have such distinguished charges.**

Clearly Mellen had her own experiences and situation in mind when this interview took place. It is particularly sad to note her comment, “Some say age is a calamity, others that it is an opportunity. So far I have observed only its calamitous aspects.”

The Danish system Mellen alluded to entitled everyone who had reached the age of sixty and was incapable of supporting himself and his family, to a pension of sufficient amount to provide the necessities of life, together with medical treatment and attendance in case of sickness. In a major objection to the scheme, it was claimed that there was grave danger that people would tend to become careless and extravagant if they were assured support in their old-age. Moreover, persons who had denied themselves things in order to save a little money would receive nothing; while those who had spent all their earnings would be taken care of by the state and the municipality.

It also should be noted that the proponents of Malthusianism were in turn influenced indirectly by Darwin's ideas via his younger cousin Francis Galton, both schools coming to heavily influence the field of eugenics. Finally, it is no accident that Henry Ford was a key devotee of eugenics. Harry Laughlin, the lynchpin of the United States eugenics movement mentioned earlier, stated in 1913 that: “Eugenics is simply the application of big business methods in human reproduction.”

The following year, in a 1947 unpublished article, Mellen wrote: “A truly civilized state would euthanize idiots, then the hopelessly and criminally insane, then incurable criminals, sex perverts, and other undesirables.” She stated that Hitler’s willingness to

execute idiots was one gesture immensely to his credit. (“Order for Euthanasia,” April 27 1947, Ida Mellen Papers, New York Public Library).

Mellen, however, was clearly behind the times when she was interviewed in 1946 and when she wrote the “Order for Euthanasia” paper. By the 1930s the eugenics movement had been losing strength nationally. The data, the motives and the “science” behind eugenics all came under scrutiny and criticism. Not only advances in science, but also political changes – most notably the abuses in Nazi Germany and elsewhere – once they became known, caused many to realize that many of the basic eugenic conclusions were incorrect.

Thus, riddled with depression, melancholia and having lost contact with the scientific community for almost 17 years, her work and thoughts became wildly speculative and out of synch with the scientific times.

## CONCLUSION

In her 2013 paper, “Portrait of an Outsider: Class, Gender, and the Scientific Career of Ida M. Mellen,”



**Ida May Mellen, New York Aquarium Days**

Samantha K. Muka argues that both class (defined as a stratification of society based on access to material resources) and gender were the roots of her difficulties through Mellen's life. "Mellen's lack of educational attainment and her reliance on her own earnings to provide financial security, both symptoms of her class standing, severely hampered her professional choices and left her open to the changing professional terrain of science. Lacking education and intimate family ties to males in the scientific community, two variables that mitigated career stresses for other women in science during this period, Mellen's career was marred by inequality, subjugation and eventually, she was left behind when the tide of scientific professionalism turned. Without influential familial connections, Mellen might have extended her career at the Aquarium by marrying a man who worked in the sciences."

Muka, however, overlooks a third element as one of the roots of Mellen's difficulties, that of emotion. The emotion I have in mind here is that of resentment. Imagine that you are the head of an institution and that when visitors wish to see the top person, the person they think of as its head and the one they really want to see is not you, but one who works under you, e.g., the situation with Townsend and Mellen. Many people would resent this situation strongly, as I have no doubt Townsend did. Furthermore, because of her outreach programs, it was Mellen who gained much more personal recognition on the layman's level than Breder. Finally, even with regard to the technical side of matters, Mellen wrote by far most of the articles relating to the New York Aquarium in the ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN than either Townsend or Breder combined. Resentment therefore was an important part of her difficulties during her New York Aquarium days, which set the stage for the further trials and tribulations that came after she was forced to resign.

In the lack of financial security, familial connections or marriage ties Mellen's life is similar to that of Rachel Carson's where both eventually found their greatest success in popular science writing and

public education. In 2001 the American Cichlid Association, recognizing her contributions to the aquarium hobby, introduced the "Ida Mellen National Leadership Award for Woman Aquarists." The inaugural award was made to Pam Chin, an Honorary Life Member of the Pacific Coast Cichlid Association (PCCA) and the editor of its award winning publication, CICHLIDAE COMMUNIQUE.

Ida May Mellen passed away in New York City on February 28, 1970, at the age of 94. She was a remarkable woman who was interested in many fields, including philosophy, science, literature, music, drama, art, poetry and sociology and, under the most trying of circumstances, excelled in most of them. She was one of a kind, and indeed, truly deserves the sobriquet, "First Lady of the Aquarium Hobby."

## EPILOGUE

I present here the full text of probably the last article Ida May Mellen ever wrote (I say "probably" since future researchers may uncover material that I may have missed). I do this because it shows the vast breadth of Mellen's interests and abilities, and because it also demonstrates a tenderness not shown in other of her writings since they were mostly technical in nature and perforce did not lend themselves easily to such sentiments.

### AN AMIABLE CHILD

By Dr. Ida M. Mellen

**"At Riverside on the high hillsant  
Two memoried graves are seen;  
A granite dome is over Grant  
And over the child the green.  
The whole world knows the hero's name  
And his blue battalions filed;  
One tender line is the other's fame—  
"An Amiable Child"**

**Moved by a small memorial overlooking  
the Hudson River in New York City,  
Catherine Markham, wife of Poet Edwin  
("The Man with the Hoe") Markham, wrote**

those lines over 20 years ago. The legend of "An Amiable Child" has intrigued and haunted pilgrims to nearby Grant's Tomb for years, yet no one today really knows the full story.

It began in 1797, when George Pollock, a wealthy New York merchant and landowner, welcomed his brother James and his family. James, his wife Jane and four-year-old son St. Claire had come from Philadelphia to visit with George before returning to their home in Ireland. Looking over his uncle's vast acres flanking what is now Riverside Drive, young St. Claire jumped up and down gleefully at the prospect of playing there.

And shortly thereafter, on a hot July 15 afternoon, the four-year-old tot was laughing and running on Strawberry Hill, refreshed by the breezes rising from the Hudson River, directly at the bottom of the hill.

But suddenly something went wrong. Did the boy slip and lose his footing? Did he stumble and fall? Was no one around to catch him? No one knows - but soon the Pollocks were mourning a little boy who had drowned in the river.

What did he look like, young St. Claire Pollock? Was he blond or dark-haired? Blue-eyed or brown? No records existing today furnish a description, beyond the inscription on the memorial placed by his parents over the grave atop Strawberry Hill before they boarded a boat for Ireland:

*Erected to the memory of  
An Amiable Child  
St. Claire Pollock died 15 July 1797  
In the fifth year of his age*

They marked the spot with a boundary fence and a marble urn, as a testament of love that has survived years of wars, changes and upheavals. The Civil War came and passed, and General Ulysses S. Grant was laid to rest nearby in an imposing gray tomb.

No strawberries grow on Strawberry Hill today. The sprawling Pollock estate has given way to a municipal park. But the City of New York, under no obligation but sentimentality, continues to care for the grounds surrounding the grave - at a cost of \$100 a year - trimming and replanting its ivy when needed.

Children who ordinarily might have no qualms about defacing city property keep their distance from this lonely grave in seeming deference. And many an adult, reading its short, tender inscription, wonders about this 'amiable' Irish boy who rests under the nearby protection of General Grant and the mother-figure of the Statue of Liberty, farther to the South.

"Strange chance! One child remembered yet,  
One, only, of his day;  
One child for whom the eyes grow wet  
Because he could not stay.  
Strange chance! For one who led no cause  
Who only lived and died -  
To lie here in Oblivion's pause  
By the great Captain's side."



The Amiable Child Grave, circa 1900.



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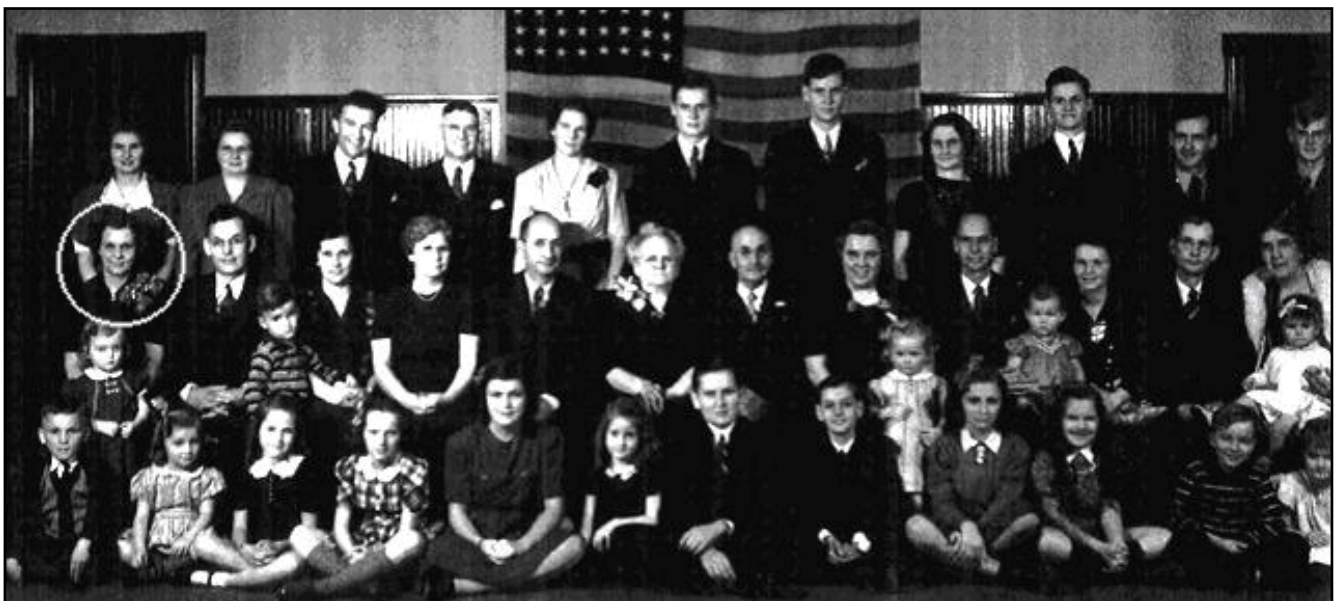
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Ida M. Mellen in a family portrait, circa 1940. Mellen is circled.

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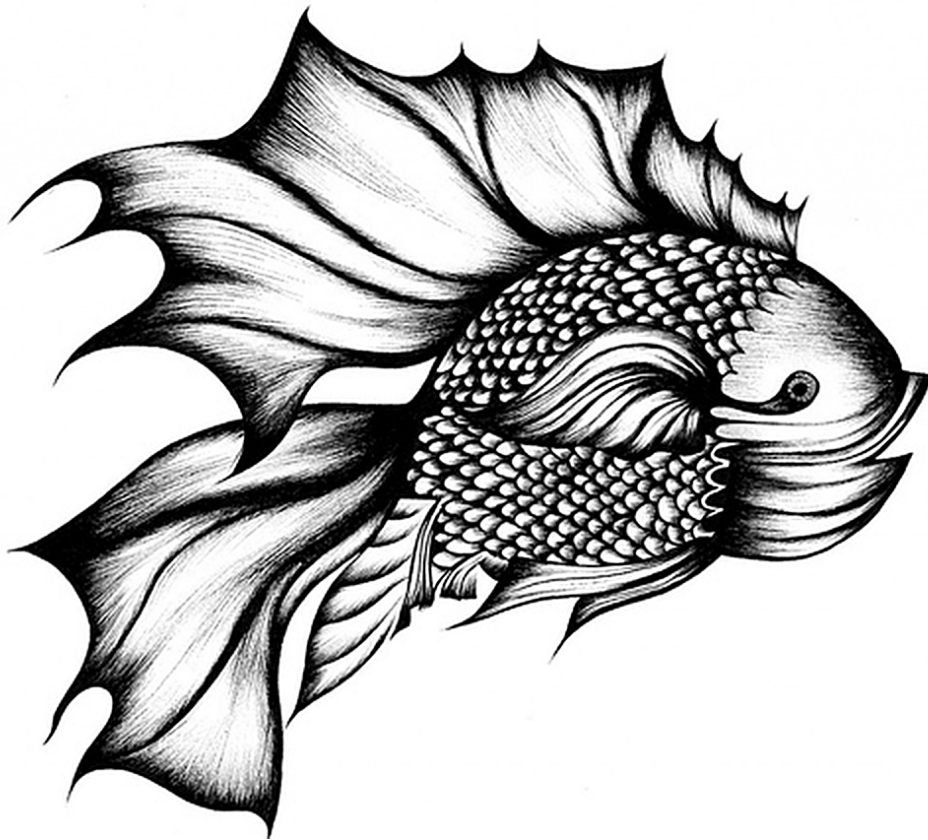
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*There was a lady bright and kind,  
Whose history did so please my mind;  
I only saw her passing by,  
But I will praise her till I die.*





**The First Lady of the  
aquarium hobby...**

**Ida May Mellen**

**AJK** Productions